# Horribly Gentle and Desperately Tormented: Reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* Through the Lens of Female Adolescence

By Emily Rast

Advised by Professor Wendy Graham

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Introduction

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* was first published in 1818, when the author was not yet twenty-one years old. She began writing the now classic novel when she was only eighteen years of age; in the introduction to the 1831 second edition, she explained that she was often asked "how [she], when a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea" (Shelley 5). And that idea, that we know so well, *is* hideous: Victor Frankenstein's reckless manipulation of disembodied corpses has disturbed generations of readers in both in its graphic corporal imagination and its gut-wrenching tragedy. Frankenstein's creature, whom he stitches together, artificially animates, and promptly abandons, is one of the most miserable creatures in literature, with a heartbreakingly tender interiority contrasting with a grotesque physical appearance and leaving him an eternally tortured outcast of human society. What is most often remembered about Shelley's *Frankenstein* in our popular culture is the text's depiction of its titular character's Prometheus-esque punishment, where his pursuit of scientific greatness and creation of life ruins his livelihood; however, I argue that the genius of the text is actually in the internal plight of Victor Frankenstein's *creature*, and, in fact, the creature is also where one can most closely find Shelley, a young female author who, unlike Victor, had no business flourishing her genius in the 19th century.[1] Structurally, as it appears in the middle of Frankenstein's story, the creature's lament is literally at the center of the book's body, the heart of the novel.

In this section of the novel, where Frankenstein is confronted with his creation, we get to see the creature's infancy as well as his coming-of-age; he is born into an adult body, and his

[1] Note that *Frankenstein* was initially published anonymously.

knowledge of the world has to develop to fill the adult-sized brain in his head. Writing from the creature's point of view, Shelley leaves much of the embodied experience up to our interpretation, focusing mostly on his intellectual and emotional growth; the body serves as an obstacle, or a means of discovery, rather than a source of pleasure or wisdom for the creature. One of the creature's first lines of text exemplifies how his sensory experience relates to his intellectual development: "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 105). Like an infant, the creature first feels an indeterminate misery, unable to define his experience through any sort of framework or reason. Sensation emerges independent of reason, surprising the creature and leaving him mystified. In this way, the inherent agedness of his body and brain aligns the creature more with adolescence than childhood—he has a naive mind in the body of an adult, much like a teenager.

Through the first-person monologue of the creature, Shelley is at her best; rather than being an ingenious gothic novel that *happens* to have been written by a young woman, I argue that *Frankenstein* is best read *through* the age and gender of its author, that it is both a powerful illustration of embodied female adolescence and an expansive utilization of form to explore the gendered identity of the self. Shelley's age at the time of writing is seldom centered in scholarship of *Frankenstein*, but it is a crucial factor in her perspective as the novel's author, informing the emotional depth and moral complexity that make the novel such a classic. It becomes clear that, really, *only* a young girl like Shelley could write a text this hideous.

1. Mary Shelley as a Teenager

Before we get into the gory details of *Frankenstein*, let's first meet our author: who was this genius teenage girl writing gothic novels? In understanding a young Mary Shelley, one must first do what she, as a girl, so often did: try to understand, through the posthumous written word, her mother. Mary Shelley[2] never met her mother, the famous philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft, but growing up as the elite daughter of writer William Godwin, Shelley was reading her writing as soon as she was able. Wollstonecraft died shortly after giving birth to Mary, her second daughter, due to unhygienic postpartum medical practices; this death, occurring only ten days after Mary Shelley's birth, was the first of many tragedies in our young novelist's life. Luckily, between Wollstonecraft's published works and the posthumous collection that Godwin published less than a year after her death, there was a significant textual legacy left behind by the early women's rights activist for Shelley to read. And, with her father being just as passionate about literature as his daughter and late wife, textuality was no small tether for young Shelley, serving as a connection between mother and daughter that she would have considered not only extremely meaningful in itself but arguably *as* meaningful as the tactile bond that the two women were never able to have.

Mary Wollstonecraft's most well-known text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, is a fierce little book. Written with a conviction that never wavers throughout its 200 pages, *Vindication* introduces a Wollstonecraft to us that is unamused, impassioned, and riveting. She introduces her book with clarity: "I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness" (Wollstonecraft 8). Note the use of "strength" and "weakness" here. Wollstonecraft prized strength as a trait that was not only available to women, but desirable for them, rejecting

[2] Born Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin.

the notion that softness was the defining characteristic of the (white) female sex and pushing for a more enlightened approach to romance and marriage.[3] Over the course of her book, she describes a multitude of different ways in which women of her social status have been suppressed by their male-dominated society, and encourages them again and again to keep a focus on rationality, despite any feelings they may acquire along the way. Wollstonecraft as rhetorician is unique in her acknowledgement of these romantic (and sexual!) feelings, and in fact she makes frequent returns to the politics of this desire throughout *Vindication*. She makes certain note of the compelling pull of desire and the inevitability of its existence; however, she refuses to yield to it, and insists that her female readers shouldn't, either: "…I cannot discover why, unless they are mortal, females should always be degraded by being made subservient to love or lust" (Wollstonecraft 26). Through argumentative writing that yearns to place agency in the hands of women and awaken the sentimental female masses, Wollstonecraft decries heterosexual desire as an obstacle, an illusion, and a tool of oppression. It is not surprising, then, that her daughter would be so bold in her novels, and, in understanding the unorthodox posthumous literary parenting that Wollstonecraft left behind, we can begin to imagine a Shelley that was thinking critically about her gendered role in society and how to write about it from a young age.

And yet, how do we, channeling the young Mary Shelley, also understand our mother Mary Wollstonecraft's existence as an emotional person, who loved feverishly and suffered greatly because of it? Shelley did not have the same access to Wollstonecraft's letters that we do now, but, because of her father's description of his late wife's relationship to Gilbert Imlay in his

[3] Wollstonecraft is cool, but her ideas are very bourgeois, and *very* white: writing at a time when slavery was legal in England, her emphasis on strength in women fails to acknowledge the exploitation of Black women for manual labor, or the social privilege that came with being regarded as desirable candidates for marriage by white men.

1789 biography of her, Shelley would have been aware of this time in her mother's life. In her letters to Imlay, which were written soon after *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* but not published until 1879, we are faced with a different Wollstonecraft:

> Cherish me with that dignified tenderness, which I have only found in you; and your own dear girl will try to keep under a quickness of feeling, that has sometimes given you pain.—Yes, I will be *good*, that I may deserve to be happy; and whilst you love me, I cannot again fall into the miserable state, which rendered life a burthen almost too heavy to be borne. (Wollstonecraft)

Here, Wollstonecraft is not quite the picture of stoic rationality that she was in *Vindication*, suppressing her needs for the sake of her lover's contentment and admitting her own as wholly determinate on his affection. Is this the same Mary Wollstonecraft who, just one year prior, lamented the fact that "[w]omen are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man" in *Vindication*? (Wollstonecraft 18). Novelist Muriel Spark, in her biography of Mary Shelley, acutely summarizes the effect of these letters on Wollstonecraft's legacy: "Mary Wollstonecraft's love letters to Imlay and her sociological work make as antithetical reading as ever came from any one pen" (Spark 6). Knowing, as we do now (through Godwin's biography, amongst other sources) that Gilbert Imlay did not share in Wollstonecraft's affection, and that she attempted suicide after his rejection, her love letters can be a difficult read; we beg her through the page to take her own advice, to be the tough, unbothered woman we met in *Vindication*. Like Spark, we are immediately disoriented by the dissonance between confident philosopher and desperate lover that Wollstonecraft leaves behind. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the Wollstonecraft of this letter is not a contradiction to

Wollstonecraft the activist, but is easily a logical extension of her; perhaps, the very fact that Wollstonecraft needs to take her own advice is the reason she gives it in the first place.

In her comprehensive biographical work *England's First Family of Writers*: *Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Shelley*, literature professor Julie Carlson joins us in playing the role of Shelley and analyzes Wollstonecraft's whole oeuvre, considering her relationship to family, domesticity, love, and heterosexuality both before and during her union with William Godwin. Carlson puts intention into reading Wollstonecraft's indignant feminist writings *in context with* the details of her biographical life, which invites her into the same tricky dichotomy that Spark outlined for us. Carlson writes that the "impassioned letters to Gilbert Imlay, and their lack of success in winning him back occasion a melancholy that is voiced by the 'I' as anxiety for her daughter [Fanny] and despair over the future of women" (Carlson 30). Immediately, Carlson suggests that Wollstonecraft's own heterosexual suffering manifested itself in her philosophical work, that her lived experience of devastating love did not negate her attitude toward men but informed it. This is crucial: Wollstonecraft was not, in her private life, the cold rationalist of her writing, but her argument is all the better for it—in understanding Wollstonecraft as an emotional person, a mother, even, we can gain a deeper understanding of her rhetorical persuasions as well as a possible set of instructions on how to live as an educated, yet sensitive, writer. Carlson's work is fascinating in that she refuses to let Wollstonecraft's desperation for affection in her personal life negate the critique of heterosexual relations in her writing, but rather asserts her right to desire, suggesting that Wollstonecraft's softness is not a weakness, as she would say, but, as we analyze her life in retrospect, ironically functions as a rhetorical strength. In this way, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* can be read as a performance of sorts, with Wollstonecraft writing from a pedestal so elevated that it's absurd; she

pretends that she is unemotional so as to get across her point in a rhetorically convincing manner, never putting her heart on the page, but rather acting the cold character of the unmovably tough rationalist.

Analyzing Wollstonecraft's writing through Carlson gives us an insight into eighteen-year-old Shelley's experience of posthumous maternal research, and provides us with a framework with which to appreciate both writers' humanity. This framework becomes crucial to our retrospective understanding of Shelley herself, as we note that she, too, was a stoic, impersonal, and highly talented female writer, hiding a tender heart beneath her writing prowess. Through Carlson's analysis of Wollstonecraft, we can simultaneously gain an understanding of where Shelley was coming from as she wrote *Frankenstein*, and retroactively analyze how Shelley herself utilized emotional persuasion in her novel; as mentioned, Frankenstein's creature is immediately notable for the empathy he attracts from the reader, suggesting that Shelley's craft also uses emotion strategically; Mary Shelley is her mother's daughter in ways that she could not have even known herself.

We will take a step back here, and rather than attempting to see through Shelley's eyes, we will compare her with her mother in a way that only time and historical distance could allow for. In the few letters that we have of Mary to her husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, we find a similar affectionate fragility to that of Wollstonecraft: "Tomorrow is the 28th of July—dearest ought we not to have been together on that day—indeed we ought my love & I shall shed some tears to think we are not—do not be angry dear love—Your Pecksie is a good girl & is quite well now again…" (Shelley 15). Immediately the phrase "good girl" stands out—both Wollstonecraft and Shelley promise goodness to the respective objects of their affections. This parallel appeasement, these mirroring tones of feminine obedience, illustrate a

fascinating similarity between mother and daughter, two literary rebels whose relationships to the men in their lives are not nearly as radical as their writing. Just as Wollstonecraft's promise of goodness comes as a surprise, so too does Shelley's coaxing sweetness contrast with the rage and gore we associate with her.

It is not my intention to scrutinize private letters between lovers, but rather to suggest that Shelley, like her mother, had intimacies that are not immediately revealed in her work, and that are purposefully omitted from her journals.[4] It can, understandably, be unappealing for contemporary feminist scholars of Wollstonecraft and Shelley to contemplate the sniveling romantic affairs of these female writers who not only contributed significantly to the (male) literary canon, but who purposefully individuated their personal lives from their work—Wollstonecraft would likely despair at the frequent allusion to her relationships to both Imlay and Godwin in analysis of her work, and it has been a longstanding stain on Shelley's legacy that she is often referred to primarily as Percy's wife. However, as we read with Carlson in mind, it is clear that the role of heterosexual desire and partnership in both of these women's lives do not discredit their literary and ideological genius, but in fact add complexity and importance to their accomplishments and their relationship to each other. Especially for Shelley, who was a teenager at the time, the role of desire should not be erased—one's love life is not the only thing that defines them, but would certainly have been a significant influence on the young author, especially as heterosexual pairing was so socially significant for women at the time. And, the dichotomy of obedient romance and literary rage suggests a Shelley who followed in the tradition of her mother, expressing herself through her writing in a way she was unable to in her personal life.

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[4] From the introduction of a compilation of Shelley's journals: "Still another misconception is that the journal may reveal secret, private affairs. These are almost nonexistent, for Mary was from the beginning a very cautious diarist, fully realizing the possibility that her journal might be read by others" (Jones viii).

Mary, like her mother, was a woman feverishly in love at the time that she wrote her most famous work; the love letter that we studied earlier was written during the years in which she wrote *Frankenstein*. Mary Godwin's romantic and sexual relationship with Percy Bysshe Shelley was a pivotal part of her life while writing *Frankenstein*, influencing the trajectory of her relationship to her family, inviting changes in her body and social status, and deepening her connection to literature; it was Percy, after all, who encouraged Mary to write the novel, and his words preface the original 1818 edition. Percy was a serious disciple of Mary's father William Godwin, entering the family's life because of his admiration of the established writer. This admiration, evidently, did not stop him from impregnating Godwin's 16-year-old daughter and fleeing with her and her sister to Europe. Percy left his wife and children for the teenage Mary, and retained a passionate relationship with her until his untimely death in 1822. Like her mother, Mary grounded her romantic relationship in her literary life, keeping a journal not so much of her and Percy's travel adventures or moments of domestic intimacy but of the books they read:

> Sunday 4th [August, 1816]
> Shelley's 24th birthday. Write—read tableau de famille — go out with Shelley in the boat & read aloud to him the fourth book of Virgil—after dinner we go up to Diodati but return soon—I read Curt. with Shelley & finish the 1st vol. after which we go out in the boat to set up the baloon but there is too much wind. We set it up from the land but it takes fire as soon as it is up—I finish the Reveries of Rousseau. Shelley reads ~~Monday 5th~~ and finishes Pliny's letters. & begins the panegyric of Trajan. (Shelley 123)

Mary Shelley's integration of literature into her personal journals is hardly shocking to us, knowing how she was raised. And, still her mother's daughter, Shelley did not forfeit the pursuit of thinking for her growing family. We know that Shelley did not isolate personal affairs from intellectual pursuits, but have not yet considered that she, too, was a mother as she wrote *Frankenstein*.

Just as her personal journal centered the books she read, the gothic book she wrote was brimming with personal details, including an exploration of her experiences of pregnancy, birth, and grief as a young mother. The eighteen-year-old Mary lost her first child after a premature birth in March 1815, and was pregnant almost consecutively for the next three years, the time in which she wrote *Frankenstein*. She and Percy were not married until after the birth of their second child, William, in January 1816, and their third, Clara, was born only six months before *Frankenstein* was published in March 1818 (Mellor xv-xvi) Shelley was a teenager, true, but it is necessary to contextualize her youth in the early nineteenth century, and in relation to Percy: Mary Shelley was a mother when she brought *Frankenstein*, her "hideous progeny," into the world, and was not in a rush to wed the father of her children. She and Percy, at the time of her writing, were travelling around Europe with newborn William in their care, placing the teenage Mary in the respectively consuming roles of mother, lover, and novelist simultaneously.

And yet, just as Carlson suggests that we do not need to read Mary Wollstonecraft's works in isolation from her tumultuous personal affairs, we do not need to read *Frankenstein* as a miraculous piece of writing created in the cracks of teenage motherhood, but rather as a piece of art informed by Shelley's circumstances at the time of its inception. In a posthumous memoir published by Percy's cousin Thomas Medwin in 1833, there is a review that the poet wrote about his wife's provocative novel. Initially, he shares in our mystification at *Frankenstein*, and admits his ignorance to the author's inner life:

> We debate ourselves in wonder, as we read it, what could have been the series of thoughts—what could have been the peculiar experiences that awakened them—which conduced, in the author's mind, to the astonishing combinations of motives and incidents, and the startling catastrophe, which compose this tale. (P. Shelley 165)

Percy engages with *Frankenstein* as a typical reader, aligning his interpretation of the text with his fellow (male) academics and general readers. He sounds much like the critics who questioned

why "a young girl" would write a novel this "hideous," as he fetishizes the text as a freakish creation by a mysterious author; this is a bit ridiculous, of course, because he not only encouraged the novel's creation, but was by Mary's side for the entirety of her writing of it.[5] But, as we analyze the text through Mary Shelley's young womanhood, it is also unsurprising to see Percy's acknowledged alienation from *Frankenstein*, since Mary was writing from a perspective that he was fundamentally unable to understand. And not only was he ignorant to it, I argue that the emotional core of her novel *derives* from the embodied life of the teenage female form which the poet Shelley himself was tirelessly transforming into a pregnant body. What if *Frankenstein* is actually not that elusive, we just aren't used to people in Shelley's social position expressing themselves in writing? What if, in fact, the "astonishing" circumstances that led to Shelley's novel are just her experience of her body?

Mary Shelley herself wrote, in the introduction to the 1831 edition of the text, that "invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself" (Shelley 8). The young Mary Shelley's ruthlessness, her fearless journey into the chaos, her pursuit of that which is most horrible, is what makes her authorship so compelling. You may recall the especially grisly death in the book of the young boy William, who shares a name with the baby that Shelley may well have had in her arms as she wrote of the fictional child's brutal murder at the hands of the creature. Which, of course, is written wickedly: "I gazed on my victim, and my heart swelled with exultation and hellish triumph; clapping my hands, I exclaimed, 'I too can create desolation; my enemy is not invulnerable[6]'" (Shelley 144). One can only imagine what Shelley was feeling as she wrote these

[5] I believe that the book was still published anonymously at this time, though, hence Percy's coyness.
[6] In the 1818 edition, the word is "impregnable" rather than "invulnerable."

words, but, as we spend time sketching out her circumstances, we can deepen our interpretation of a text that has become so universal. In understanding *Frankenstein*'s Mary Shelley as a young woman who lost her mother due to complications from her own birth, pursued romantic passion for an older man, experienced pregnancy and birth not long after her own sexual maturation, fled to Europe, and lost a child, we are much more apt to understanding the horrors of *Frankenstein* than had we read it in isolation from her personhood and social status, and we can more acutely discern meaning from the emotional wreckage that she pens. Not only was she a young woman, but she was a young woman whose body was constantly in flux, a being barely matured past childhood who, without a mother, was creating life herself.

## 2. The Creature in Context

Now, with a better idea of *Frankenstein*'s author, let's revisit the text that we all know so well with a more critical lens. In the Godwinian tradition of literary intimacy, Mary read her parents, Percy read Mary, and we, with the privilege of two more centuries of scholarship and literature, read all of the above. We will, ultimately, be wrestling with the same question as Shelley's husband, of what the young writer was thinking when she wrote her gothic novel; however, unlike Percy, we can read *Frankenstein* not as an anomaly, but as an articulate literary expression of feminine experiences that, though personal to Shelley, were hardly exceptional, and might even be timeless.

The oft-cited scientific fiction legacy of *Frankenstein* focuses on the novel's criticism of the obsessive, reckless academic, with the full title of the novel calling Frankenstein "The Modern Prometheus;" however, the real marvel of *Frankenstein* is how it pities Frankenstein and

his creature *in parallel*, not defining a hierarchy of experience but rather defining the two tragedies as interwoven, equal, and never-ending. There could easily be a *Frankenstein* that is written from Frankenstein's perspective, and allows the creature to be a simple characterization of evil; however, the young Shelley sadistically—ingeniously—tortures both characters in her novel. In giving a voice to the creature, Shelley writes with a wicked pen, not allowing for any salvation.

Shelley compels us, in the first volume of the novel, to empathize with Victor Frankenstein, defining him as a doomed genius whose only flaw was being too engrossed in his studies. His schooling is seductive, allowing the reader to watch him formulate hideous life with as much enthusiasm as the creator himself:

> From this day natural philosophy, and particularly chemistry, in the most comprehensive sense of the term, became nearly my sole occupation. I read with ardour those works, so full of genius and discrimination, which modern enquirers have written on these subjects. I attended the lectures, and cultivated the acquaintance, of the men of science of the university… My application was at first fluctuating and uncertain; it gained strength as I proceeded, and soon become so ardent and eager, that the stars often disappeared in the light of morning whilst I was yet engaged in my laboratory. (Shelley 51)

Of course, one thinks, this bright student, this prodigy of science, would want to further his studies in such a devotional manner—it is exciting to watch his passion develop, even as it strains his personal affairs. As a female writer who, like her mother, was not permitted a formal education, Shelley was likely portraying Victor's schooling enviously, or at least through a fantastical lens; to Shelley, the world of men's feverish laboratories was a foreign one. To some extent, too, one has to consider her relationship to Percy, his acceptance within the academic world and her exclusion from it. Victor Frankenstein, in the beginning of the novel, is the same age as Shelley when she wrote it, suggesting a parallel between her as self-educated writer and

her titular character as academic scientist; he is just as mad as she is, but he gets the schooling and laboratory, and she, like her mother, has the pen.

Shelley's initial focus on Frankenstein in her novel is not just entertaining, though, it is strategic: the safety and mundanity of Victor's world is what makes the switch to the creature's point-of-view in the middle of the book so striking, and what makes the creature's misery so devastating. It is not until Frankenstein is confronted with his own creation that his academic actions are made questionable, and the whole foundation of the text shakes. Just when you think you have a grasp on the novel Shelley is writing, she gives a voice to the monster:

> 'Thus I relieve thee, my creator,' [the creature] said, and placed his hated hands before my eyes, which I flung from me with violence; 'thus I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Still thou canst listen to me, and grant me thy compassion. By the virtues that I once possessed, I demand this from you. Hear my tale; it is long and strange, and the temperature of this place is not fitting to your fine sensations; come to the hut upon the mountain. (Shelley 104)

With the creature's subjectivity revealed, and his tragic tale recounted in detail, Frankenstein's academic agony comes across thinner than it did before. Shelley invites the reader into the story comfortably as the privileged male character, and then pulls the rug out through a heartbreaking creature monologue, where one's perception of Frankenstein's social privilege develops. In the same moment that Frankenstein learns about the creature's plight, we, too, gain insight into the life of another. Suddenly, we are made aware that there is a status below that of the tortured genius: the wretched creature that is not even allowed in the door.

As Shelley herself was writing from an outside perspective about the intimacies of formal education, she invented this creature that is characterized by his feelings of alienation, who is so unimportant to society that his creator could abandon him and go back to school the next day. The reader, coming to the novel from Frankenstein's perspective, does not consider the feelings of his creation until she tells us to—this moment of reveal is one of the novel's most powerful.

Shelley is genuine in her empathizing with Frankenstein, but she is also ruthless in her characterization of his reckless creation, constructing an emotional intensity that masterfully invites us into two distinct levels of social status. She writes, through the creature, “Every where I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded” (Shelley 103). Shelley, in her novel, understands Frankenstein, but is certainly angry at him, dwelling almost laboriously on characterizing the creature as horribly gentle and desperately tormented. And, given her status as a bourgeois white woman who, had she been born male, would have been formally educated, the injustice between these characters is not hard for us to grasp. As the creature first desires to speak, Shelley writes, “Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again” (Shelley 106). This passage, when taken at face value, is a comprehensive recounting of the creature’s development into a social creature; however, when taken through the lens of Shelley as author, the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, it can also be read to mirror the experience of a woman coming into adulthood. The desire to speak, but the shame and confusion at the attempt to do so, feels especially feminine when placed in Shelley’s context as a writer in the early nineteenth century, and in reference to the Victor/Percy circles she was speaking in.

We have previously considered her respective relationships to her mother and husband, but what about Shelley’s relationship to her father? Does the developing selfhood of the creature relate to his role in her life, as well? William Godwin was alive and present in Shelley’s life, but there is reason to believe that her teenage rage did not spare him, either—and just as she read her late mother’s writings, she grew up reading her father’s anarchist political philosophies. As we analyze the creature’s anger toward his creator, we can equally parallel it with Shelley’s relationship to her famous father; as previously suggested, like Wollstonecraft, Godwin resisted

the institutions of marriage and the family in his writing. Carlson writes that "Godwin's objections to love are wider-ranging [than Wollstonecraft's], extending to the entire set of domestic affections that he so famously indicts as impediments to justice in his *Essay concerning Political Justice*" (Carlson 25). Godwin was a rigorously academic, literary father, pursuing a rationality much like that which Wollstonecraft championed in *Vindication*. However, where this is a point of unity between Shelley and her mother, Godwin's literary coldness further alienates him from his daughter, due to the difference in opportunity that the two writers received; you will recall her husband's ignorance, as previously described. In the same way that Mary Shelley, as the wife of Percy Shelley, may have felt envious of his and his friends' scholarly male lives, *Frankenstein*'s emphasis on Frankenstein's education reflects the privileged status of Godwin versus Mary and her mother, who were self-educated.

Like the creature, Shelley's main form of education came from reading the books on her dad's shelf, and second-handedly absorbing the education of those in her life who were allowed to receive it. In *Frankenstein*, this recycled, 'womanly' education left the creature feeling alienated and distressed:

> As I read, however, I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read, and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathised with, and partly understood them, but I was unformed in mind; I was dependent on none, and related to none. (Shelley 131)

In creating a smart young woman such as Shelley, in a household in which authors such as Milton provided the lens with which to see the world, Godwin formed a paradox for his daughter much like Frankenstein did for his creature. What is one to do, when they are intelligent enough to read about the world, but are trapped in a body that is not like the ones in the books? Whose fault is that, if not the author/father who made both the world and the literature? The creature is a

being whose mental capability is in tension with his physical form, in how it is received socially and how it is able to serve him emotionally; Shelley, like her mother, was self-educated, and yet knowledgeable enough to be torn apart by the impossible tension of an enlightened womanhood in the early nineteenth century. Shelley and Wollstonecraft knew that they had been created in vain, that their female forms made them an inferior species, but they lived and married anyway; the untraditional politics of their husbands did not save them from the fate of their bodies in the time they lived.

Just as we search for meaning in the words of Mary Shelley, who left behind so few primary sources beyond her published writing, and in the same way that Shelley got to know her own parents, Frankenstein's creature agonizes over the words of his creator in the novel. As he recounts his time of development and solitude, Shelley has the creature describe reading a discarded journal that Frankenstein left behind in the lab:

> It was your journal of the four months that preceded my creation. You minutely described in these papers every step you took in the progress of your work; this history was mingled with accounts of domestic occurrences. You, doubtless, recollect these papers. Here they are. Every thing is related in them which bears reference to my accursed origin; the whole detail of that series of disgusting circumstances which produced it is set in view; the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your own horrors, and rendered mine indelible. I sickened as I read. (Shelley 132)

It is in passages like this, basking in the devastating wretchedness of the creature, where Shelley develops the bleeding heart of her novel. The creature, addressing his maker face-to-face, is a form so perfectly depressing that it *is* sickening. He confronts Frankenstein with textual evidence in hand, citing the records of his creation as evidence of the wrongdoing enacted upon him. Writing is a weapon here, signifying a rebellion in Shelley against textuality's holy pedestal in her family. In contrast to Carlson's claim that writing can literally be a force of life's creation for the Godwins—"Where these two writers agree is in construing heterosexual lovemaking as a

textual, at times bookish, activity"—in *Frankenstein* it frequently serves as a reflection of life's sufferings, especially as it pertains to the creature's coming-of-age (Carlson 26). Interestingly, the creature specifies that the invention of his person occurred in parallel with "domestic occurrences," rather than as intertwined with them; the creature's birth was not a matter of the home, but rather an obstacle to it. The central conflict of Victor Frankenstein's life in the novel proves this to be true, as his making of the creature isolated him from his family both before and after its inception, and served as an unbreakable barrier to his ability to live domestically.

This separation of intellectual project and familial domesticity in *Frankenstein* mirrors what we know of Wollstonecraft and Godwin's attitudes toward marriage, through Carlson's biographical portrait: "Even before they knew or loved each other, Wollstonecraft and Godwin each identified heterosexual love as a major impediment to their visions of social perfectibility. For both, perfectibility required achieving a society that is committed to truth and that serves and preserves the independence of the individual" (Carlson 24). To both parties, emotional affairs such as love and marriage worked in contradiction to rational choices; Wollstonecraft specifically lamented the extent to which women's lives were governed by a need to develop "irrational traits" like beauty and charm (Carlson 25). To Shelley's parents, domesticity was a part of life, but not the defining feature of it, and it was often a restrictive agent; in *Frankenstein*, Shelley rebels. The creature wants nothing more than domestic bliss, where Shelley's parents scorned the thought of it; he uses the written evidence of this practice, texts just like those with which Shelley met her parents, as fuel for his intolerable rage at existing. In this way, Shelley, in *Frankenstein*, thinks in opposition to Wollstonecraft and Godwin; rather than wonder what would happen if people were free from irrationality, Shelley wonders what happens to the *child* born out of rationality; through the creature, she criticizes the family made of scientists who use

"language which painted your own horrors, and rendered mine indelible" (Shelley 132). She, barely a young adult herself, and with an infant of her own, questions: what happens to offspring when marital domesticity is isolated from reproduction? And then, what is the child to do, when left only with the intellectual philosophies of its invention, rather than the emotional care? What about when the creator abandons it?[7]

Though Shelley may have inherited her devotional tendencies from her mother, her emotional wrath, expressed through the creature's monologue, targets Wollstonecraft for leaving, and Godwin for raising her. There is a horror in the creature's discovery of the absent parent, the selfish creator, that is revealed through the ghostly words of Frankenstein's journals, the disembodied past-life that devised his inescapable suffering and hideous form. As Shelley's identification with the creature has been previously established, it is difficult, then, to deny the possibility of her own feelings of anger at both of her parents emerging through the creature's words.

## 3. Embodied Monstrosity

Evidently, regarding external factors like social status and familial relations, Shelley is reflected in the creature; however, as we think about the breathing being who wrote *Frankenstein* as an adolescent female, there is also an embodied connection to the creature that is especially noteworthy as we continue to explore youth, gender, and their intersections in the novel. One can imagine that Mary Shelley, an eighteen-year-old writer whose female exterior prohibited her

[7] Percy Shelley left behind the children from his first marriage when he and Mary became involved, and supposedly never saw them again, even after the death of their mother (Carlson 257).

from participating in academic society, would resonate with the dissonance between external and internal life that the creature endures. However, in addition to relating through mind, Shelley is actually also present in the (male) creature's experience of body, a connection that is crucial in our understanding of *Frankenstein* and its legacy.

The nameless creature is often referred to colloquially as Frankenstein's "monster," and is most often characterized in the novel and in popular culture by his hideous appearance. The horrible effect that his looks have on human society is taught to him through interactions with others, and it quickly becomes clear to him how starkly his embodied experience is contrasted with those who are socially acceptable, desirable, even:

> I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers—their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. (Shelley 116)

This passage, isolated from its gothic setting, could come from a teenager's diary. The creature's alienation from society is literal through Shelley's monstrous framework, but through our biographical lens, we can also imagine the lived experience that Shelley was channeling into these words. The experience of self-hatred and jealousy based on one's own physical appearance has an easy resonance in the horror invoked by changes in the body during and after puberty, especially for a woman. We know, too, that Shelley (though she herself had only just reached sexual maturation) had already experienced pregnancy at the time of writing; the motif of the freakish self gazing into a mirror and not recognizing its grotesque reflection is one that has resonance with the disorientation of this embodied experience. Shelley's use of monstrosity does not necessarily equate the female/pregnant body with hideousness, but rather, in leading us to empathize with the misunderstood creature, finds emotional depth in a monstrous embodied

experience—Shelley does not have to find herself hideous to understand what it would be like to not recognize her reflection, and know that it would affect how others treat her.

The creature's monologue in *Frankenstein*, as it goes on, is almost tediously drawn out, with his short personal history explained in great detail. Without an interest in the creature as a character, there would be no reason for Shelley to investigate his inner life so meticulously in the center of her novel beyond the initial shock of his eloquence and self-definition, demonstrating the unexpected importance that Shelley imbues this portion of the text with. As he first began to engage with the sensations of the world, when he "knew, and could distinguish, nothing," the creature was unaware that a certain physical acceptability was requisite to social assimilation and communication (Shelley 106). Once he learns of his ugliness, and his inability to live in community amongst others, his suffering begins. The creature, much like a teenage girl, is heavily socialized in his discovery of self; as the brain matures, the (sexualized) body becomes an obstacle, transforming from a means of movement and energy sustainment to a reflective surface of the desires of a harsh (patriarchal) society. His experience of embodiment, as mentioned, is entirely dependent on external factors and social norms. In fact, he is aware that his physical form is in many ways superior to that of other people, stating that he "was more agile than they, and could subsist upon coarser diet; [he] bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to [his] frame; [his] stature far exceeded theirs" (Shelley 123). The actual experience of his body means nothing to him, however, in light of the hatred it evokes. The creature would much prefer to be loved by conventional society than to be biologically superior—he would, in short, rather be acceptable and respectable like Victor than have a body with super powers. We think, here, about the ability of a body like Shelley's to birth children. Having a powerful body, in *Frankenstein*, is no consolation prize for being treated as socially inferior.

The creature's alienation from society is critical to his adversity, the tragedy that Shelley develops in her novel; the creature wishes to be respected, loved, and in dialogue with society, but he is shunned. As he is continually made monster by his circumstances, he (in a very Shelley way) analyzes his life through his newly acquired Miltonesque literary knowledge:

> Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; 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 132)

Could this passage not have been written from the perspective of Eve? The creature aligns himself with Adam's isolation and lack of knowledge, but differentiates himself in physicality: where Adam is "happy," the creature is "wretched," unable to communicate or prosper because of his imperfect body. Shelley's explicit juxtaposition of the creature with *Paradise Lost*'s Adam is important here, where it frames Adam as yet another Victor/Percy/Godwin figure that has something seductive and valuable that is eternally withheld from the creature/Shelley/Wollstonecraft.[8] And there is a bodily horror in development here, with the creature—who was constructed from fragmented corpses—expressing his anger at the inherently flawed nature of his flesh, that which is a collage of others. In stating the creature's desire to relate to Adam, but also his failure to have been born a child of God, Shelley begins to ask the pivotal question: is the creature a man? What is he, if he is not Adam (and was, as we know, created by *Adam*, not by God)? The creature is aligned with Eve in a twofold sense, as he was created by Adam (Victor Frankenstein), but also Adam (the corpses of others)—he was, literally,

[8] The resonance with Satan, rather than Adam, also, is evocative of the historical fear of the female body as evil, momentarily placing Shelley's creature in dialogue with witches and other fearsome women of centuries past.

formed from the rib of another. If Mary is the creature, Percy could be Victor Frankenstein, a male genius who invented Mary's pregnant body without suffering the consequences himself.

The creature's monstrosity reflects Shelley's embodied anxieties while remaining narratively male, or at least distinctly not female—in this way, the gothic form allows Shelley to play with gendered identification pretty loosely. In his 1995 critical text *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Jack Halberstam explores these gender paradoxes in *Frankenstein* through a scene that I had yet to consider: Victor's construction and subsequent destruction of a female monster. After his creature insists on the development of a female companion, Victor spends hours building her in his laboratory, only to change his mind and destroy the body before he gives it life. In *Skin Shows*, Halberstam emphasizes the explicit gendering of the two monsters that Frankenstein builds, suggesting that Shelley's illustration of two distinct, sexed creatures—and their fates—is key to our understanding of *Frankenstein*. The original creature "is not human because he lacks the proper body—he is too big, too ugly, disproportionate," while "[t]he female monster cannot be human because it is always only an object, a thing, 'unfinished'" (Halberstam 35, 51). In his analysis, Halberstam describes the animated monster with gendered pronouns, while his inanimate sequel is referred to as "it;" not only is the female monster not a man, it is not even a monster. Both of Frankenstein's creations are defined by their inability to be human, but the male monster is inhuman in his monstrosity, while the female is, literally, an inanimate object. She is not even a character in the text, just a failed idea and a pile of body parts—in a sense, she/it serves as a symbolic object in Frankenstein more than a member of its social hierarchy.

The distinction between the dismembered "female monster" and the male creature of Frankenstein's invention, however, begs the question of what actually signifies the femaleness or

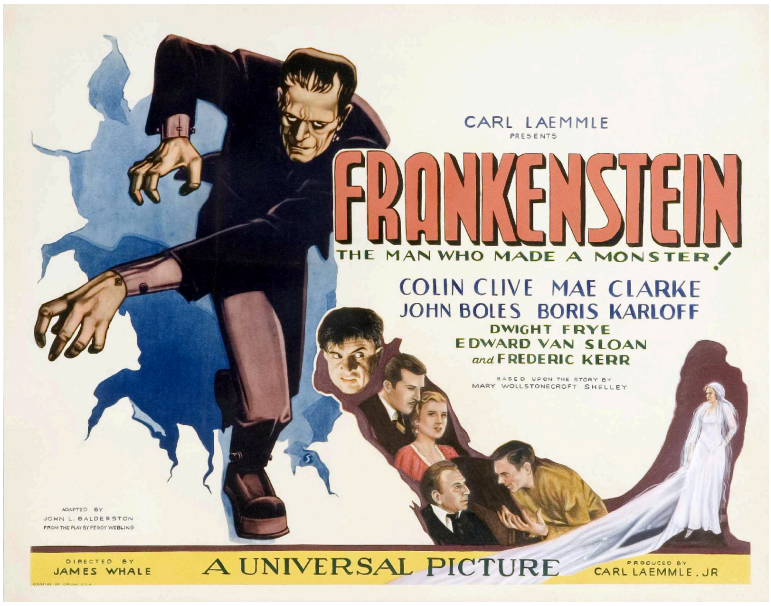
maleness of the creatures in Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Theorists often take for fact the creature's manhood, in reference to other characters in the text and other media depictions of monstrosity; I wonder, however, about the usefulness, or the accuracy, of limiting Frankenstein's creature to his gender in our analysis—what even defines him as male? And what is the ultimate effect of differentiating him from critical femaleness—does it do Shelley, or the genre, justice? Isn't what she's doing more interesting than writing a book about two male characters?

Halberstam creates a binary of monstrosity, but he also makes a point to juxtapose the creature with (Frankenstein's) humanity, implying that there are gender dynamics in *Frankenstein* that cannot be categorized simply in male/female terms. In addition to using body to differentiate the two monsters, Halberstam uses the creature's physicality to form a social gender distinction between him and his creator, suggesting that the hierarchical binary between the two creatures does not necessarily privilege the creature's gender status in the whole context of Shelley's novel. Halberstam identifies Victor's "humanness" with his "status as male, bourgeois, and white," in contrast with the creature's "yellow skin, his gargantuan size, his masslike shape, and his unstable gender," rightly identifying the privileged race and class status of Victor as contributing to his societal security, and the physical abnormality of the creature as limiting his (Halberstam 32). I would like to add that in his monologue, the creature describes that he "possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. [He] was, besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; [he] was not even of the same nature as man," contrasting nicely with Halberstam's characterization of Victor's privilege while still relating back to the embodiedness of the creature's freakishness (Shelley 123). In relating the creature's lack of financial capital to his crisis of identity here, Shelley suggests that he is not a man both in his grotesque appearance and his miserable social status, unifying the social and physical terms

of his gendered experience. The creature is not really a man; and yet, we know that he is also not what Halberstam refers to as the "female monster," indicating that his "unstable gender" is applicable in terms of both male *and* female status.

Halberstam's focus on the male creature's literacy is another notable moment in his work, as we know that literature as a means of self-definition is a frequent motif for Shelley, one that is available to both men and women. Halberstam makes the useful articulation early in his analysis that "[o]rigins, in *Frankenstein*, are always literary or textual rather than religious or scientific," and later emphasizes that "[w]hile the male monster educates himself and argues eloquently with his maker, the female monster repels Frankenstein before he has even brought her to life" (Halberstam 50). Halberstam, here, complicates my earlier argument about Shelley's identification with the creature's "uncouth and inarticulate sounds;" though we know that the creature struggled to speak at first, Halberstam reminds us that he does, eventually, speak eloquently (Shelley 106). However, so did Shelley: though she was a woman, she wrote a novel, using her literary knowledge and talent to "argue eloquently with [her] maker" (Halberstam 50). Shelley, as author, put herself in an unstable position: she was not quite reduced to the silent, companion body of the female monster, but she wasn't the privileged male creator, either; like the creature, she was the freak who wasn't supposed to speak. In the creature's jagged genderedness, as framed by Halberstam, we can discover a reflection of the tension between womanhood and literature that Shelley experienced at the time of writing the very novel in which she processes it.

The specifics of the creature's physical appearance are not illustrated in too much detail in the text, but Shelley describes a strength and size that adaptations often align with masculinity. In visual versions of *Frankenstein*, the creature is generally portrayed as tall, broad, and manly.




I do wonder about the ability of a visual representation of monstrosity to escape a presentation of gender. Part of what makes *Frankenstein* effective as an exploration of womanhood is the ambiguity that Shelley can get away with through the medium of gothic literature—she can describe villagers shrieking in horror at the image of the creature without telling us exactly what he looks like. I do, however, want to challenge the historical insistence on masculine physicality in the portrayal of the creature: in addition to his strength, Shelley also writes that his "organs were indeed harsh, but supple," and that he was "uncouth and distorted in its proportions;" he is also described multiple times as having long hair (Shelley 118, 221). Can awkwardness and bulky proportions only be masculine? Would a pregnant Shelley, for example, not have felt distorted? Why does the creature, even if he is able to sexually reproduce with a female, have to resemble man, at all? Isn't that inhumanity, and the infinite possibility of it, the point of monstrosity? I am not convinced, actually, that the creature is very distinctly gendered in the text at all, and in fact Shelley's ambiguity in his physicality allows for an expansiveness that has been historically flattened.

In her 1993 book *The Monstrous-Feminine*, scholar Barbara Creed analyzes depictions of monsters in horror films, specifically what she coins as the "monstrous-feminine," a term she purposefully differentiates from mine and Halberstam's "female monster" because the latter "implies a simple reversal of 'male monster,'" and Creed wishes to define her category of monstrosity in more expansive, self-defining terms (Creed 3). Creed writes about a multitude of horror and sci-fi films that feature female-inspired monstrosities, including the (menstrual) blood of *Carrie (1976)*, the mothering of *Alien (1979)*, and the womb of *The Brood (1979)*. Unlike Halberstam's more socially constructed analysis, Creed's definition of these themes of monstrous-femininity engages with the physicality of these films, the visual representations of horror that mimic physiologies of what we consider to be womanhood; she is interested in how the suggestions of femininity in the formation of these cinematic monsters reflects the anxieties of both male and female viewers, respectively. She invokes psychoanalysis in her scholarship, writing, "The monstrous-feminine draws attention to the 'frailty of the symbolic order' through her evocation of the natural, animal order and its terrifying associations with the passage all human beings must inevitably take from birth through life to death" (Creed 83). Creed explores how the female body itself is a site of horror, citing theories like the castrating mother and vagina dentata to deconstruct popular usage of female physiology in horror cinema.

However, in regards to Frankenstein's creature/monster, and the accompanying "female" monster that Halberstam introduced us to, Creed's argument can actually be restrictive; it is once again pertinent to consider what actually defines the creature as male, and how it serves us to exclude him from our feminist monster analysis. What are the physical traits needed to be included in the conversation of the monstrous-feminine, and are we even sure that Frankenstein's creature doesn't have them? Does his hypothetical penis really make him less female than aliens

and witches, when he resonates so much of the embodied experience of womanhood through his inhuman appearance? And what could we gain from expanding our definitions of gendered traits as they relate to monstrosity?

Frankenstein's creature is narratively determined to have male genitalia, true; but this is only relevant once he is characterized in juxtaposition with the hypothetical female creature, and reproduction is proposed. As he considers the implications of creating the female, Frankenstein says that "one of the first results of those sympathies for which the dæmon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth" (Shelley 170). It is revealed, here, that the creature is hypothetically capable of sexual reproduction with a female, but this possibility is quickly nullified when Frankenstein destroys the body of the female monster. Since the creature is barred from engaging with human society, his gender is never really defined before this moment; he does not exist in community with male or female others, and never develops physically, having been born fully grown. The only understanding the creature has of any parent is the journal that Frankenstein left behind in the lab, and even in this it is made clear to him that human reproductive organs were not involved in his inception. The anxiety by Victor Frankenstein expressed in this passage—and the destruction it leads to—is key to our understanding of the creature's gender, because it strips the creature's reproductive organs/phallus of their meaning; in destroying the female monster, Frankenstein functionally castrates his creature, aligning Frankenstein with the castrating mother and unaligning the creature with phallic manhood. Being incapable of reproduction, sexual relations, or having a mother, the creature is not only ambiguously gendered, but actively removed from the category of man; he is castrated, in a sense, both by Shelley's/Frankenstein's invention of him, and the alienation that he endures because of his grotesque physical appearance.

Frankenstein's creature is a monster; his inability to engage with society, and his freakish origins, categorically differentiate him from human gendered experience, allowing for Shelley—as an eighteen-year-old girl—to resonate with him; and her alignment with the creature's physicality is not in spite of his "male" body, but in conversation with it. In fact, as I have previously mentioned, the creature's body is not even necessarily reflective of human men, and functionally mirrors Shelley's adolescent, maternal figure as much as it does the lanky, green man of *Frankenstein*'s cultural legacy. Creed herself laments the overattentiveness of feminist critics on biological function when studying the symbolic order: "In theory the phallus is a neutral term that no one, male or female, can possess; in practice the phallus is frequently aligned with the penis;" yet, her definition of monstrous-femininity's inability to relate to "male" monsters fails to consider the weakened, and in the case of Shelley, expansive, gender exploration that monstrosity fundamentally creates (Creed 161). If we are taking the penis out of the phallus, then there is no reason that Shelley's monster shouldn't be analyzed with the same feminist scholarship as Creed's monstrous-feminine examples; does the creature not "[draw] attention to the 'frailty of the symbolic order' through [his] evocation of the natural, animal order"? (Creed 83). Is the (rejected) possibility of male sexuality really what defines the creature in opposition from the monstrous-feminine, when he does not experience the sociality of manhood?

Creed's writing—specifically what she interprets as the castrating (rather than castrated) mother in Freudian analysis—moved me to further consider Victor Frankenstein's role in his creature's life, being a parent that is, ultimately, both mother *and* father. Creed generally considers the monstrous-feminine to act in the maternal role in regard to the (male) viewer and victim, but in the case of *Frankenstein* the monster himself is both child and

quasi-monstrous-feminine. Here, in expanding monstrous-femininity to include Frankenstein's creature (in conversation with his creator), we can use Creed's analysis to elucidate the complexity of gender in the text, exploring how Shelley's novel is able to dismantle its creature's masculinity through strategic removal of function. Victor Frankenstein doesn't need a womb to reproduce, and the creature's penis is functionless; the lack of symbolic genitalia in *Frankenstein* works to feminize its characters in a way that is consonant with our understanding of Shelley as author, and exists in the genre of female horror as much as any other.

Not only is Victor Frankenstein characterized by his violent destruction in the latter half of the novel, but the creature murders people both on and off "screen." Where Frankenstein destroys because of fear, his creature kills for revenge: "'Shall each man' cried he, 'find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone?… I may die; but first you, my tyrant and tormentor, shall curse the sun that gazes on your misery'" (Shelley 172). The creature's violence is distinctly related to his castration, the torturous lack that causes his suffering throughout the novel. The anger that Shelley so passionately articulates in *Frankenstein* reflects a state of embattled castration that would be—you guessed it—resonant for its female author, coming from a place of frustration in embodiment that she, as a woman, would know intimately. Creed writes in her book that "[t]he reason women do not make horror films is not that the 'female' unconscious is fearless, without its monsters, but because women still lack access to the means of production in a system which continues to be male-dominated in all key areas;" I argue that not only did Mary Shelley write a monstrous horror story, almost 100 years before the dawn of cinema, but that her womanhood is what enabled her to invent such a grotesque, angry male monster in the first place (Creed 156).

One can imagine a liberation for Shelley, then, in the primitive violence of the creature. In the latter half of the creature's monologue, she writes, "I was like a wild beast that had broken the toils, destroying the objects that obstructed me and ranging through the wood with a stag-like swiftness (Shelley 138). The creature's manic, violent freedom amongst the natural landscape doesn't feel malicious, but rather logical, as Shelley aligns the reader with the torment that his body has imprisoned him to suffer in the earlier pages. He *is* powerful in body, and in rejecting the social restrictions that have tortured him he finally finds freedom in his physicality. The creature has a refreshing level of self-assuredness here, comfortable in his emotional reaction and its justification. Coming from the perspective of a writer whose gender held her back from so much, there is a raw desire in the creature's angry outbreak: "All, save I, were at rest or in enjoyment: I, like the archfiend, bore a hell within me, and finding myself unsympathised with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat down and enjoyed the ruin" (Shelley 138). Similarly to the earlier mirror passage, which read as a diary, there is a contemporary feel to these lines, where it is easy to find the passion of youth in Shelley's words. What woman, at the age of nineteen, didn't feel this way? The creature's rage, especially as it is contrasted with the simple, obedient society of the other characters, is very much Mary Wollestonecraft's daughter coming through—Shelley expresses rage at the body and world she was born into through her monster.

## 4. Coming-of-Age and Other Horrors

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is unique in many ways, but, as we consider its content and form through the lens of female adolescence, her novel is not as alien as it seems, actually

relating to a diverse range of media from the last two centuries. In the novel, the creature experiences a new abundance of emotional range and embodied experience that he then works his way through from scratch, evoking modern coming-of-age narratives that we are now so familiar with, for example.[9] At her young age, Shelley would have been understanding her own identity as an adult for the first time, and the primitive blankness with which the creature's monologue is endued is reflective of this curiosity in her. The inability of the creature to know/distinguish anything is reminiscent of media where the young protagonist stumbles aimlessly through their newfound emotions, sensations, and role in society, a connection that is hardly coincidental given the novel's author and her previously established resonance with this character. One of my personal favorite *Frankenstein*-esque moments in media is in the classic Disney film *The Little Mermaid* (1989), when protagonist Ariel expresses herself through "Part of Your World:"

> I wanna be where the people are
> I wanna see, wanna see them dancing
> Walking around on those - what do you call 'em? Oh - feet!
> …
> I'm ready to know what the people know
> Ask 'em my questions and get some answers
> What's a fire and why does it… what's the word? Burn?
> When's it my turn?
> Wouldn't I love, love to explore that shore up above?
> Out of the sea, wish I could be part of that world (Benson lines 21-23, 37-42)[10]

Ariel's alienation from "the people," her desire to be "part of that world," aligns her with the creature's desire and connects the creature's plight with that of a teenage girl (the little mermaid

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[9] Anywhere from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women (1868)*, to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937)*, to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird (1960)*, to Greta Gerwig's film *Barbie (2023)*… think naivety, discovery, a shiny and scary new world to explore.

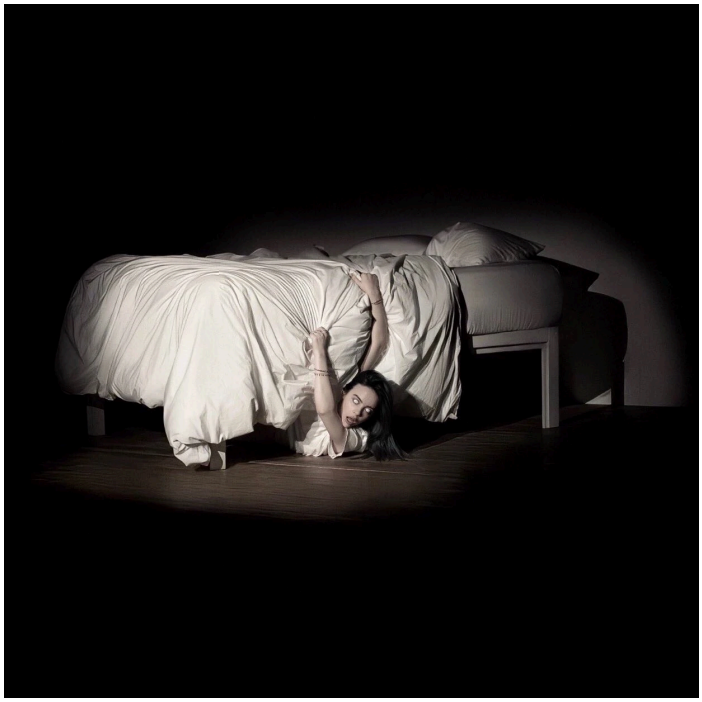
[10] This song always also reminds me of Jinny in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*: "My lips are precisely red. I am ready now to join men and women on the stairs, my peers. I pass them, exposed to their gaze, as they are to mine. Like lightning we look but do not soften or show signs of recognition. Our bodies communicate. This is my calling. This is my world" (Woolf 73). Perhaps an anti-creature? The creature who is freed?

being a more literal example of monstrosity symbolizing adolescence and sexual maturity). The creature's story is easy to compare with characters such as this, indicating that *Frankenstein*'s use of genre, though useful, does not exclude it from remaining thematically consistent with what we consider to be more predictable adolescent media, and that Shelley as author is not actually as singular, or weird, even, as she is often perceived to be.

*Frankenstein*, in its gothic mode, also introduces a genre for us to track since its inception: teenage girl monsters! I mentioned *The Little Mermaid* (both the Disney film and the original Hans Christian Andersen text[11] have interesting things to say about puberty and female sexuality), and some others that come to mind are Stephen King's *Carrie* and Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*. However, what I am especially interested in as it pertains to *Frankenstein* is the teenage writer making *herself* a monster, and this is harder to find in our popular culture; I offer, for your consideration, musical artist Billie Eilish's 2019 album, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*

Eilish's debut album, released when she was only seventeen years old, was a tremendous commercial and critical success, winning the coveted Album of the Year award at the Grammys and topping the Billboard 200 chart. For such a mainstream success, however, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP* and its accompanying visuals are, frankly, freakish.

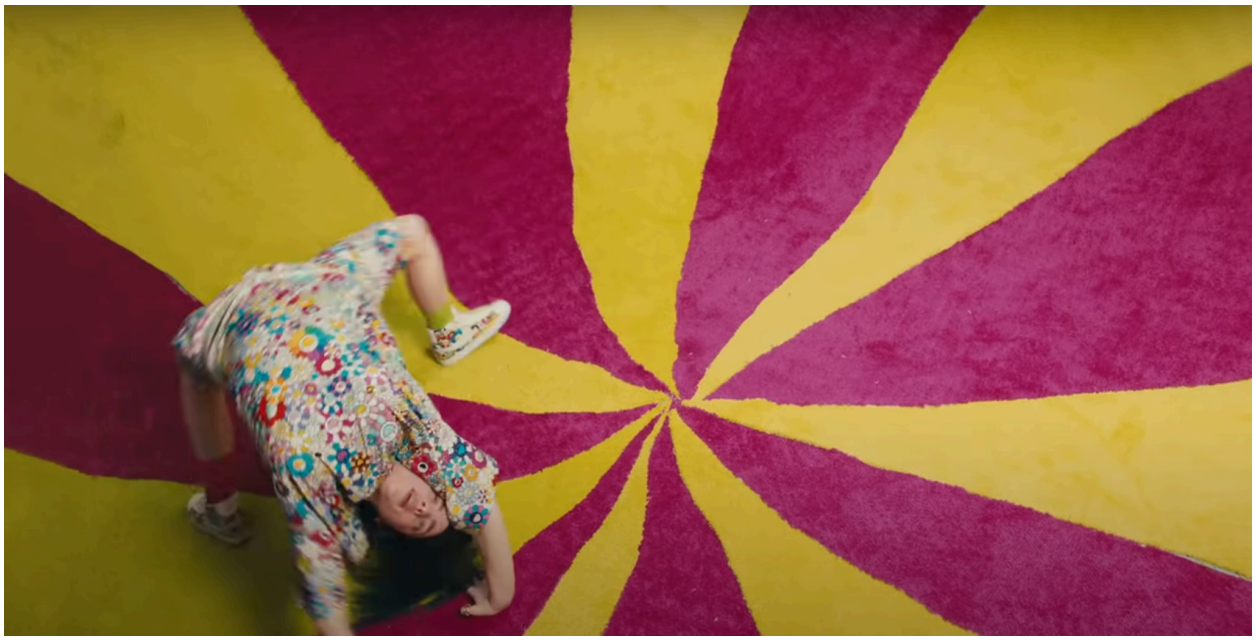
[11] Danish author Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, interestingly, was published in 1837, not long after *Frankenstein*. There is, potentially, something to be said about *non-teenage girls* using these bodies to express *themselves* (Andersen is considered to have been queer. I also think of Oscar Wilde).

 [12]

Eilish, in the above image, depicts herself as the proverbial monster under the bed, utilizing disturbing, hellish imagery to accompany her music. Her lyrics are often just as provocative, beginning with the song “bad guy:” “I like it when you take control / Even if you know that you don't / Own me, I'll let you play the role / I'll be your animal … I'm that bad type / Make your mama sad type / Make your girlfriend mad tight / Might seduce your dad type / I'm the bad guy” (Eilish lines 20-23, 32-36). Eilish, in these lyrics, satirizes herself as the sexualized teenage girl, defining her sexuality with villainous destruction as a means of mocking her audience’s perception of her. In being the “might seduce your dad type,” she is not cute, hot, or even innocent: she is something more sinister, sexual and demonic with a comedic twist, pushing back against the socialization of her body audaciously. She also aligns herself with a figurative (patriarchal?) power, much in the way that Shelley does—both women fantasize about destroying societal roles through their monstrous personas (you recall the creature’s murderous

[12] Outtake from the album cover photoshoot.

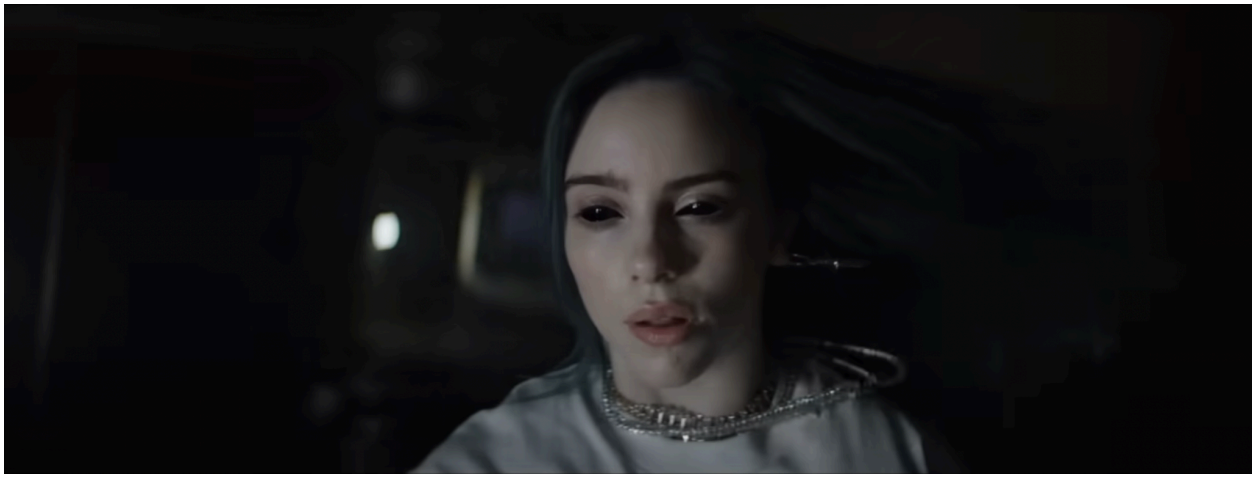
vengeance, killing Frankenstein's "girlfriend" and the rest of his loved ones). Where we earlier appreciated Shelley's ability to express anger through the creature, we can extend the same understanding to Eilish's imagined violence.

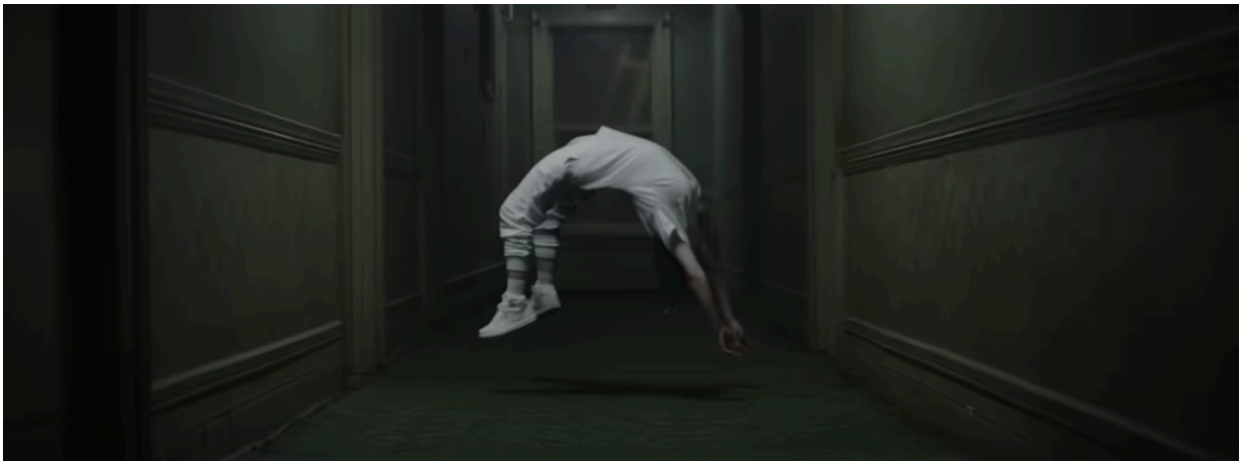


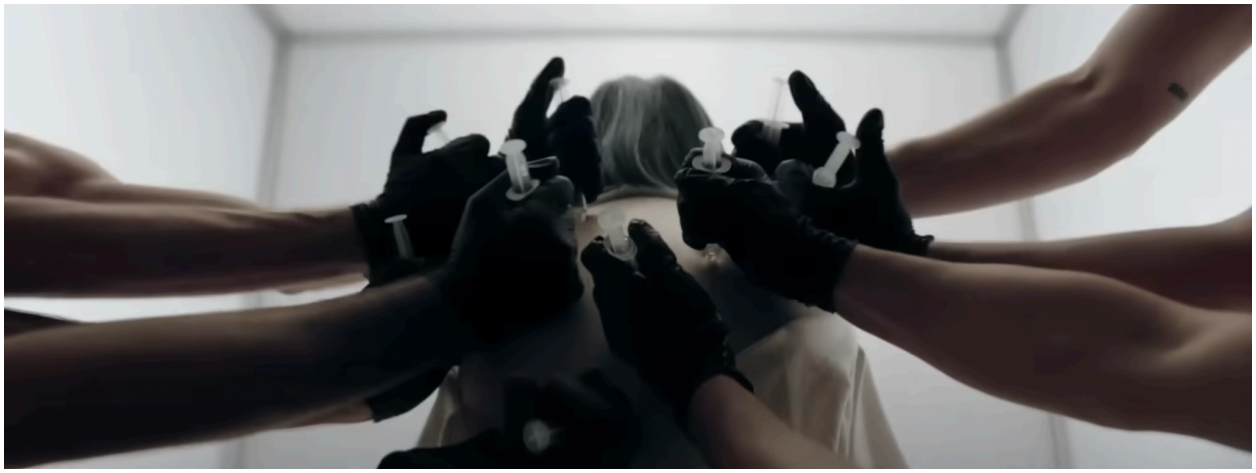
There is also a similar liberation in Eilish's self-depiction of grotesqueness to that of Shelley's, where her gendered body becomes less defining, less *gendered*. Eilish could even be

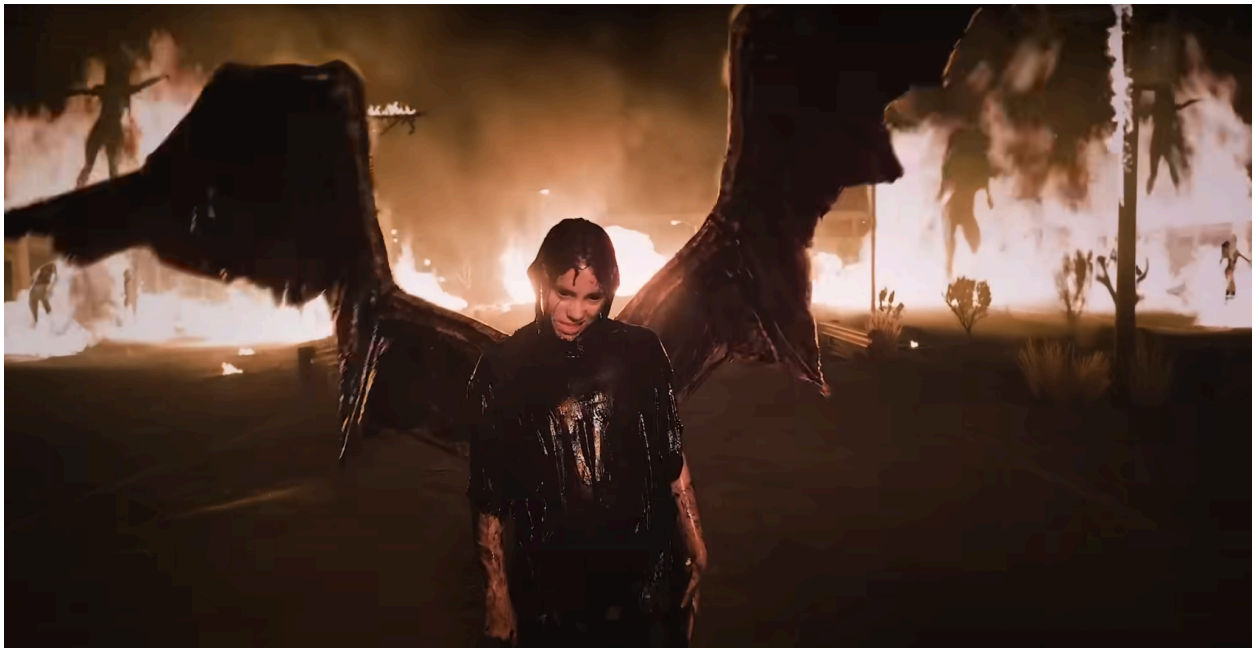
characterized here with Barbara Creed's Freudian female castrator analysis, threatening the social order through the role of the "bad guy." As we think about Shelley's use of gothicism as a means of escaping—or at least confronting—the lived experience of teenage girlhood, we can also appreciate Eilish's rejection of social expectations of femininity and sexuality through her music and imagery.

In her visuals Eilish uses monstrosity as a means of self-identification, uniquely curious about what we find disturbing: she crawls around on the ground, she bleeds, spiders come out of her mouth, she falls from heaven, fire rages behind her, she cries black ink. I don't believe it is a stretch to suggest that Eilish, in a 2019 pop music campaign, was using the same language that Mary Shelley did with *Frankenstein*: self-expression through monstrosity as a mode of both processing and punishing the development of the socialized female body. By looking at contemporary work like Eilish's we are better equipped to understand Shelley, too, as Eilish is able to express a brazenness in herself that Shelley was only able to explore through the creature—Eilish is a monster in her big tee-shirts and Nikes, maintaining the coolness of youth in tandem with her rejection of the social roles that have defined her body since before Shelley's time. Where Shelley's creature is a symbolic, literary representation of herself, Eilish portrays herself as herself, but with the addition of monstrosity—herself *as a monster*.









Alternatively, Shelley developed a depth in her work that can reveal nuances in Eilish. Both of the artists' works are playing with adolescence in its embodied experience and the accompanying identification with a new social role; Eilish and Shelley are both young women discovering the world for the first time, and their monstrous creations can't help but plead with us to satisfy their unanswered questions. As we look closer at Eilish's song "bury a friend" through the lens of *Frankenstein*, we can see this emotional connection between the two young artists: "What do you want from me? Why don't you run from me? / What are you wondering? What do you know? / Why aren't you scared of me? Why do you care for me? / When we all fall asleep, where do we go?" (Eilish lines 1-4). Eilish's existential questions almost directly mimic those of *Frankenstein*'s creature, who wonders, "My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?" (Shelley 131). Eilish identifies herself almost paradoxically with Shelley's creature's monstrosity here as she asks, "Why don't you run from me?" She sees herself as a monster, though others don't; we are reminded that, like Eilish, Mary Shelley was a beautiful

woman privileged in her racial and class status. In both cases, from the outside perspective, monstrosity acts as a projection or even satirization of self, rather than a true self-portrait; we recall that both of these women are some of the most socially advantaged of their gender. However, to Shelley and Eilish, the metaphor may be just as true, if not truer, than their reality—it is also possible that the monstrous form may be less of an alter-ego and more of an externalization of their inner selves, even if it is within a privileged context.

It is interesting to reflect on Shelley's choice of genre, when we see it mimicked through Eilish so many years later. Shelley's choice of medium was, evidently, a strategic one: the gothic genre, in addition to its capability for the supernatural, is one of melodrama. In contrast with the domestic novels or Enlightenment texts of the time, Gothicism searches for what is intense, playing with sublimity in the extravagance of its emotionality. What is exciting about Gothicism is how it transforms mundanity into monstrosity, reflecting human experiences through superhuman stories. In the textual world of stormy nights and demons in the attic, a broken heart can be just as devastating as murder, and, in Shelley's case, adolescence can be a ghost story.

## 5. Conclusion

Percy Shelley wrote, of *Frankenstein*, "[t]he elementary feelings of the human mind are exposed to view" (P. Shelley 166). Mary Shelley taps into something pure in her novel, evoking an emotional reaction in her reader on a large scale that is evocative of youth, or at least youthful passion, like that which we saw in her and her mothers' respective love letters. The teenage girl, culturally, experiences emotion and love in a unique and uniquely intense way—musician Phoebe Bridgers' aching lyric: "wanna make you fall in love as hard as my poor parents' teenage

daughter," or the "ecstasy" that Virginia Woolf's describes as Mrs. Dalloway recalls her young feelings for Sally Seton (Bridgers line 14). As one of the earliest gothic writers, the heart that Mary Shelley wears on her sleeve in *Frankenstein* becomes a marker of the genre, and yet we can appreciate it now as tethered to the lived experience that she, at the time, was bringing to her novel.

Later in his review, Percy Shelley also refers to his wife's text as "innocent" (P. Shelley 167). Percy's adjective, in its condescension, perfectly encapsulates the paradox of growing up as a young woman, the maddening experience of developing sexual and reproductive capability with no wisdom or social capital. Shelley had already given birth before her eighteenth birthday, and yet when Percy calls her innocent, he is not wrong—she had the life experience of a child. Part of the rage that Shelley must have been expressing in her novel is the impossibility of this paradox, the hugeness of it all. Lord Byron, famous friend of the Shelley's, wrote at the time of its publication that *Frankenstein* is "a wonderful work for a girl of nineteen." Percy Shelley continued his review by writing that "[t]here are, perhaps, some points of subordinate importance, which prove that it is the author's first attempt" (P. Shelley 166). In 1987 Muriel Spark wrote that Shelley "was immature when she wrote; but she had courage, she was inspired" (Spark 154, 178). The narrative is too often that Shelley's genius was able to come through *despite* her youth, but this framework fails to acknowledge that without the circumstances in which she created the novel, it would not have the emotional core that makes it so distinctive and persistent in the literary canon, nor its iconic exploration of embodied identity through monstrosity.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a rare text that was written by a teenage girl—and takes, as I have proven, much of its thematic inspiration from this experience—yet it has been

understood as a pivotal text in the Western literary canon for the last two hundred years, a tradition that is largely male and seldom interested in the ideas of eighteen-year-old mothers. A specific combination of factors made the widespread reception of *Frankenstein* possible over the years, including (but not limited to) Shelley's wealth, the literary connections/legacy of her parents and husband, her privileged position as a white woman in England, and the book's pseudonymous publication. Gothicism itself has historically been a genre popular amongst white and upper-class writers, with its themes of otherness often working to *uphold* racial and sexual discriminations, rather than subverting them (I do not personally believe this to be true of *Frankenstein*, but there are many interesting reads of the text in its racial context—the creature as an alienated character has many afterlives as we continue to read, teach, and adapt the novel). For this reason, Shelley's text, though we now see it as unique in its point of view, was not necessarily radical for its time, and has likely been absorbed by many over the years who attributed a white maleness to it, because of its titular character and genre. Ironically, had it been interpreted in the way that contemporary feminist and queer scholars now read it at the time of its publication, *Frankenstein* would likely not have had such a long life.

Since its publication, there have been countless adaptations of and references to *Frankenstein* across different forms of media, with varying interpretations and focuses (as I mentioned earlier, we see a popular preoccupation with Victor Frankenstein as scientist).[13] I personally believe that literary analysis in itself is a form of adaptation, too, so in undertaking this project I have contributed to the growing legacy of people who have found something to care about in Shelley's novel, possibly even something personal. In her 2018 book *Harvester of Hearts: Motherhood under the Sign of Frankenstein*, English professor Rachel Feder integrates

[13] Most recently Yorgos Lanthimos' film *Poor Things (2023)* has gained attention adapting Shelley's text, and Guillermo Del Toro's film adaptation is set to release at the end of this year.

biographical readings of Shelley, critical analysis of *Frankenstein*, and her own personal experience of motherhood into a heartfelt autobiographical text that is resonant of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*; Feder uses transparent vulnerability as a tool with which to look at *Frankenstein* through a contemporary critical lens. She writes, of her experience giving birth, "After years of wondering *how*, I myself fainted twice, clinging to you. I fainted from the blood loss, the hours of pushing, the days of effort. And as I woke, I thought, *just like in* Frankenstein" (Feder 7). Since reading *Frankenstein* for the first time at the age of fifteen, and then again at nineteen, and now at twenty-one, I have had the same obsessive tendency as Feder: *constantly*, moments in life feel to me that they are "*just like in* Frankenstein" (Feder 7).

What is it about Shelley's text that is so addictive, so universal, prophetic, even? I come back to the creature, again and again, his knowing and distinguishing of nothingness, his love of the moon, his silent laboring on behalf of the cottagers. Feder believes that "[y]ou're never more yourself than when you're reading *Frankenstein*," and maybe she's right; or maybe I am just Shelley's age, and Feder is just experiencing motherhood; or, maybe, the novel's invitation into madness is the gift that Shelley left for us (Feder 3). There is certainly a liberation in *Frankenstein*, even with its sadistic (masochistic?) tragedy: Shelley develops a means of expression that allows for an imagination beyond the female body's sexual and reproductive capabilities, a written rage at her embodied experience that Billie Eilish mirrored 200 years later, that continues to push us to invent modes with which we can radically articulate the impossibility of female sexual maturation, self-definitions that function purposefully in their defiance.

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