To William Godwin

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Keywords
Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, William Godwin, Frankenstein
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In 1987, Professor Betty T. Bennett discovered twelve letters written by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley to her cousin Elizabeth Berry in the manuscript archives of the Mitchell State Library in Sydney, Australia (Mitgang 29). These letters reveal that Mary Shelley did not share the radical political views of her father, William Godwin. So why did she dedicate her novel, *Frankenstein* (1818), to her father – author of *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams* – if she was opposed to the political ideologies expressed in his works? Beginning with her dedication, Mary Shelley used *Frankenstein* to covertly express her own political views and to warn Godwin and his poetic disciples that their revolutionary writings could
have dire consequences for their readers and for themselves. Their ambitious stance in challenging the religious, political, and social conventions of the day later cursed these writers with guilt and regret as the horrors of the period’s many uprisings became more widely known. Victor Frankenstein’s tale was being told to William Godwin and the Romantic poets who were following in his footsteps in the hope that they would see in Victor many of their own traits and learn from his mistakes.

The Romantic period was a time of accelerating change. It began with the revolutions in America and France and ended with the reform of England’s Parliament (Damrosch 3). Amidst the social turmoil, William Godwin resigned from the ministry in 1782 and became an atheist. He switched his focus from religion to politics and became “a spokesperson for political radicalism” (Smith 7). Professor Kelvin Everest explains that the Romantic revolt was “a revolt in a more thorough going sense, against the very existence of dominating shared standards and conventions” (2). Laura K. Egendorf adds that the Romantics used their writing to, “break loose from the chains of modern society and explore the idealized worlds that they created in their mind” (15). Thus, they gave voices to masses of people in the lower and middle classes who resented the unjust social, political, and economic privileges associated with the traditional monarchy and class structure. In his Marxist reading of Frankenstein, Warren Montag describes the mobs of people mobilized to fight for the French Revolution as “a monster that, once unleashed could not be controlled” (386). This “monster” was the masses that fought and died for the Romantics’ “idealized worlds” during the period’s many violent uprisings that began with the French Revolution and culminated with England’s “Great Reform Bill” of 1832 (Everest 2).

In their reaching for political and social change, the poets and writers of the period had indeed created a monster. The mobs were fed on the Romantics’ works as propaganda; these masses dreamed of liberty and equal rights for all, but instead of a glorious revolution, France found itself in a period of chaos and tyranny. Mary Shelley distanced herself from the radical views of her father’s literary circle because she was not as interested in
have dire consequences for their readers and for themselves. Their ambitious stance in challenging the religious, political, and social conventions of the day later cursed these writers with guilt and regret as the horrors of the period’s many uprisings became more widely known. Victor Frankenstein’s tale was being told to William Godwin and the Romantic poets who were following in his footsteps in the hope that they would see in Victor many of their own traits and learn from his mistakes.

The Romantic period was a time of accelerating change. It began with the revolutions in America and France and ended with the reform of England’s Parliament (Damrosch 3). Amidst the social turmoil, William Godwin resigned from the ministry in 1782 and became an atheist. He switched his focus from religion to politics and became “a spokesperson for political radicalism” (Smith 7). Professor Kelvin Everest explains that the Romantic revolt was “a revolt in a more thorough going sense, against the very existence of dominating shared standards and conventions” (2). Laura K. Egendorf adds that the Romantics used their writing to, “break loose from the chains of modern society and explore the idealized worlds that they created in their mind” (15). Thus, they gave voices to masses of people in the lower and middle classes who resented the unjust social, political, and economic privileges associated with the traditional monarchy and class structure. In his Marxist reading of Frankenstein, Warren Montag describes the mobs of people mobilized to fight for the French Revolution as “a monster that, once unleashed could not be controlled” (386). This “monster” was the masses that fought and died for the Romantics’ “idealized worlds” during the period’s many violent uprisings that began with the French Revolution and culminated with England’s “Great Reform Bill” of 1832 (Everest 2).

In their reaching for political and social change, the poets and writers of the period had indeed created a monster. The mobs were fed on the Romantics’ works as propaganda; these masses dreamed of liberty and equal rights for all, but instead of a glorious revolution, France found itself in a period of chaos and tyranny. Mary Shelley distanced herself from the radical views of her father’s literary circle because she was not as interested in
“revolution and creating new worlds” as she was in improving the existing social structure (Egendorf 20).

Mary Shelley used both Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton to warn her readers about the dangers of ambition. She designed Frankenstein so that Victor is the novel’s primary narrator and Walton, who listens to his story, takes the place of the reader. Like Walton, the reader is meant to learn something from this cautionary tale. The readers of 1818 that could learn the most from Victor’s tale were the second wave of Romantic poets, particularly Mary’s husband, the renowned poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. In one of his first letters to his sister, Walton describes how passionate Victor is in relaying his story: “I [Walton] paused; – at length he [Victor] spoke, in broken accents: – ‘Unhappy man! Do you share my madness? Have you drank also of the intoxicating draught? Hear me, – let me reveal my tale, and you will dash the cup from your lips!’” (38). Similarly, Frances Winwar describes Godwin as being, “intoxicated with his dream of perfection: The time would come, hailed Godwin, … when there should be no ignorance, no inequality, no distinctions of sex, nor death!” (4). Godwin and Victor are both intoxicated by their quest to improve humanity through new theologies. They also share the same dream to rid the world of death although Godwin means preventable deaths from the hands of tyranny and oppression while Victor plans literally to rid the world of death by using the scientific secret he has discovered. The similarities between these two revolutionaries are remarkable. Biographer Emily Sunstein comments on this resemblance:

[Progressives] considered Godwin an immortal martyred leader of the great cause that would rise again. Granting his lack of common sense in Political Justice, they compared him to a great, if failed, explorer on humanity’s behalf – a Promethean paradigm that Mary would immortalize in her scientist, Frankenstein [emphasis added], whose confidant, Walton, is a polar explorer. (20)

Walton seems destined to follow in Victor’s footsteps, just as Percy and the second wave of Romantic writers seem destined to
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Walton seems destined to follow in Victor's footsteps, just as Percy and the second wave of Romantic writers seem destined to
follow in Godwin’s footsteps. Ironically, early reviews of the book placed its themes among the works of the very radicals Mary Shelley was trying to warn.

When *Frankenstein* was published in 1818, the novel was presumed to be a contribution to the debate on national religion that William Godwin and his followers had provoked in the 1790’s. Because Mary Shelley originally published *Frankenstein* anonymously, many people suspected that her husband was the novel’s architect. Sir Walter Scott wrote an enthusiastic early review of the novel in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (March 1818) that “established *Frankenstein’s* ‘stature’ and novelty on ‘supernatural’ fiction, and the author’s ‘original genius.’ Scott, like most people, assumed that [Percy] Shelley had written *Frankenstein*” (Sunstein 156). The novel’s dedication to Godwin led many early critics to detect immorality and impiety in its pages. An anonymous author from *Edinburgh Magazine* confidently states:

> It *[Frankenstein]* is formed on the Godwinian manner, and has all the faults, but many likewise of the beauties of that model. In dark and gloomy views of nature and of man, bordering too closely on impiety, – in the most outrageous improbability, – in sacrificing everything to effect, – it even goes beyond its great prototype. . . . (249)

Radicalism, impiety, immorality, and the “Godwinian manner” were all associated with the novel in its early reviews.

The mystery of the author’s identity did not endure for very long. To correct the misconception that Percy was the author, Mary wrote a brief note to Scott taking responsibility for the novel. Bennett highlights the wittiness of this young author: “Mary wrote a letter thanking him for his kindness about her book” (Mitgang 29). Word traveled fast that the author of *Frankenstein* was not only a young woman but the daughter of radical feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin (Smith 4; Sunstein 156). Critics and contemporary readers were lost in the intricacies of Mary’s design. Searching for her father’s and husband’s radical ideals in the novel, they failed to see one of its fundamental themes. *Frankenstein* is Mary Shelley’s own Romantic revolt against her
follow in Godwin’s footsteps. Ironically, early reviews of the book place its themes among the works of the very radicals Mary Shelley was trying to warn.

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Terence Allan Hoagwood lists two characteristics of Romanticism that explain why Mary Shelley may have used *Frankenstein* to covertly express her political views:

First, figural or symbolic substitutions are induced in the discourses of art when politically contentious material is dangerous under political repression.

Second... Romantic works often turn to reflexive thought and writing about symbolic substitution and correlative acts of interpretation. (3)

When Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, women had not yet gained the right to vote; therefore, it was a risky endeavor for a woman to write about politics. Knowing how her mother’s reputation had been dragged through the mud, Mary was particularly cautious when she entered the public sphere. Her caution was very likely augmented by the fact that she was criticizing two men whom she loved and with whom she shared much of her life—her husband and her father, both of whom had well-established public identities.

Iain Crawford supports this idea of a hidden agenda in *Frankenstein*:

That Mary should have voiced her qualifications in this covert manner need hardly be surprising, since there is little cause to assume that she articulated them fully even to herself and every reason for understanding why they should have remained disguised in print. (259)

Her conservative message was cleverly “disguised in print,” but for Crawford to say that she did not “fully articulate them even to herself” (259) deprives Shelley of the credit she deserves for writing this meticulously crafted novel. She deliberately chose to express her opinions clandestinely. Much of what is known today about Mary Shelley’s political views comes from her once private letters and journals.
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Sylvia Bowerbank uses Mary Shelley's journal to support the belief that Mary has a "spirit of conservatism," despite the radicalism that dominated her father's literary circle (418). In a journal entry from 1835, Mary reflects on the radical philosophies that defined the Romantic period:

With regard to "the good cause" – the cause of the advancement of freedom and knowledge, of the rights of women, &c. – I am not a person of opinions [...] Some have a passion for reforming the world; others do not cling to particular opinions. That my parents and [Percy] Shelley were of the former class makes me respect it [...] I have argumentative powers; I see things pretty clearly, but cannot demonstrate them. Besides, I feel the counter-arguments too strongly. I do not feel that I could say aught to support the cause efficiently.

(Bowerbank 418-419)

Although she would probably deny it, this entry shows Mary's opinion about "the good cause" and reveals her critical perspective on the period's political writers. The quotation marks around "the good cause" suggest that Mary finds the terminology at least partially suspect and seems to question whether the cause was actually good. She also states that she feels "the counter-arguments too strongly," which indicates that she has in fact taken a stance against the radical politics of her father's circle. This letter makes it clear that she was much more conservative about politics than her parents and husband. Mary did not want to change the world as drastically as they did because she was more concerned about the loss of innocent lives and the destruction caused by society's revolutions.

The most convincing evidence of Mary's opposing political views comes from the series of letters recently discovered in Australia. In one letter to her cousin's husband, Alexander Berry, Mary comments on the political situation in England and Europe in the year 1848:
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Our public men perpetually make the grossest mistakes, & all they do, had better be left undone [...] Our colonies are just now of the mightiest import, while strange & (mighty) fearful events are in progress in Europe. Barbarism – countless uncivilized men, long concealed under the varnish of our social system, are breaking out with the force of a volcano and threatening order – law & peace. [...] In France how unscrupulous was the flattery that turned the heads of the working classes & produced the horrible revolt just put down. (Letters 363)

Since the letter was written in 1848, she is not talking about the public men of the Romantic period. The men she is describing, however, are the same public men that her father and husband represented forty years earlier. She also makes a connection between the architects of the revolt and the mobs of people mobilized to fight for their cause: “Barbarism – countless uncivilized men, long concealed under the varnish of our social system,” (363) refers to the men responsible for the revolt, and “the flattery that turned the heads of the working class” (363) describes the works of those men that enlisted the working class to fight for the cause. Interestingly, Mary describes those responsible for creating the revolt as “countless uncivilized men” (363) while the mobs of people mobilized to fight are referred to as “the working classes” (363). The relationship of politicians to the lower classes parallels Victor’s relationship to his creation and raises the question – examined in countless critical essays – of whether the creature or Victor represents the true “monster.” Mary’s letter illustrates her concern about contemporary political issues, as well as her belief in progressive reform rather than violent revolutions.

The most significant clue to the hidden agenda in Frankenstein comes from Victor’s “confidant,” Robert Walton. Walton’s first letter to his sister Margaret Saville reveals that he once aspired to be a Romantic poet:

These visions [the dream of embarking on a polar voyage] faded when I perused, for the first time,
Our public men perpetually make the grossest mistakes, & all they do, had better be left undone [...] Our colonies are just now of the mightiest import, while strange & (mighty) fearful events are in progress in Europe. Barbarism – countless uncivilized men, long concealed under the varnish of our social system, are breaking out with the force of a volcano and threatening order – law & peace. [...] In France how unscrupulous was the flattery that turned the heads of the working classes & produced the horrible revolt just put down. (Letters 363)

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Walton’s dream of becoming a Romantic poet draws a direct link between the Romantic poets that Mary is criticizing and the novel’s overreaching characters, Walton and Victor. The connection between Shelley’s fictional characters and the famous poets of her time shows that the ambition driving eager explorers and mad scientists also drives Romantic poets.

The university where Victor studies offers another link between Mary Shelley’s fictional characters and the political activists of the period. At Ingolstadt University, Victor meets M. Waldman, his professor who depicts modern scientists as gods:

These philosophers, whose hands seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pore over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles... They ascend into the heavens: they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe.

(Frankenstein 53)

Before the advent of modern science, scientists were referred to as natural philosophers. In the years surrounding the release of Frankenstein, there were great leaps made in the fields of science and politics. The universal name “philosophers” used to describe these professions blurs the boundaries between political philosophers like William Godwin and the period’s scientists. Emily Sunstein draws another significant parallel between Ingolstadt University and the period’s political activists, pointing out that “Ingolstadt University [was] the cradle of the radical Illuminati sect” (123). This University was the headquarters of “political visionary” Adam Weishaupt, founder of the Illuminati. Weishaupt later became a conservative, disillusioned by the violence of the French Revolution (Sunstein 50; 427).

Marking the time-span in which the events of Frankenstein unfold is difficult. Walton’s letters to his sister are
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Marking the time-span in which the events of Frankenstein unfold is difficult. Walton’s letters to his sister are
dated, but the decade and year are omitted. Warren Montag, however, points to a passage that places the novel in the midst of the French Revolution. During their journey to Scotland, Victor and his friend Henry Clerval stop briefly in Oxford, England:

As we entered this city, our minds were filled with the remembrance of the events that had been transacted there more than a century and a half before [emphasis added]. It was there that Charles I. had collected his forces. This city had remained faithful to him, after the whole nation had forsaken his cause to join the standard of parliament and liberty. The memory of that unfortunate king, and his companions . . . gave a peculiar interest to every part of the city, which they might be supposed to have inhabited. The spirit of elder days found a dwelling here, and we delighted to trace its footsteps. (Frankenstein 140)

Montag remarks, “Frankenstein’s meditation on the Revolution of 1642 in England locates the narrative in the 1790s, placing it in the midst of the French Revolution” (385).

This is not surprising considering that the French Revolution was the major event of the period and that Frankenstein was published just two years after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 (384). What is remarkable about this allusion is that “its tone is unexpectedly sympathetic to Charles I, a monarch typically regarded by the Whigs (moderates of the day), let alone the radicals of Shelley’s circle, as the very figure of a tyrant” (385). This passage illustrates exactly how Mary Shelley uses Frankenstein to discreetly express her conservative political views.

The allusion to England’s civil war is significant because it reveals that Mary Shelley is sympathetic not specifically to Charles I but to “the spirit of elder days” that the king represented. After Charles I was beheaded by order of Parliament in 1649, England fell into a dark period of chaos and tyranny. The new Parliament was unable to accomplish anything, and dissolved of its own accord. Oliver Cromwell claimed to be an opponent of absolutism but governed more absolutely than Charles I. Few leaders have
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inspired more fear and hatred. Eleven years after the beheading of his father, Charles II was welcomed back to England where he restored the throne and traditional political system (Southgate 918). Like the people of England, Victor longs for the past. Victor now sees that nature’s cruelty in death and childbirth is not as horrific as his own creation. The results of both Victor’s experiment and Parliament’s experiment turned out to be worse than the problem itself.

Warren Montag maintains that the English and French revolutions were “the most developed and elaborate social and political ‘experiments’ in modern history and both had ‘failed’ . . . .” (385). By using the French Revolution as a backdrop for *Frankenstein*, Shelley draws a parallel between the English Civil War and the French Revolution. This reinforces one of the central themes of the novel. Montag explains:

> Even the most cursory examination of this singular period reveals that its key themes are precisely those of *Frankenstein*: there is everywhere a sense of monstrous forces unwittingly conjured up in order to serve the project of progress and the Enlightenment but have ultimately served to call that very project into question. (384)

After the collapse of the French monarchy, chaos ensued. Conservatives and even those who looked to the revolution with optimism began to question its resolve. The Romantic poets who supported the revolution were at least partially to blame.

In 1793, Godwin released *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, which biographer Emily Sunstein defines as a “weighty anarcho-utilitarian treatise” (16). Godwin’s proposal included the arguments for the abolition of all traditional institutions of political authority. Everest explains the radical nature of Godwin’s *Political Justice*:

> *Political Justice* offered a somewhat self-consciously abstract outline of ‘political anarchy,’ which objected to all constraints whatsoever on the operation of pure reason (constraints such as governments, family, emotions). In a famous example Godwin
inspired more fear and hatred. Eleven years after the beheading of his father, Charles II was welcomed back to England where he restored the throne and traditional political system (Southgate 918). Like the people of England, Victor longs for the past. Victor now sees that nature’s cruelty in death and childbirth is not as horrific as his own creation. The results of both Victor’s experiment and Parliament’s experiment turned out to be worse than the problem itself.

Warren Montag maintains that the English and French revolutions were “the most developed and elaborate social and political ‘experiments’ in modern history and both had ‘failed’ . . . .” (385). By using the French Revolution as a backdrop for *Frankenstein*, Shelley draws a parallel between the English Civil War and the French Revolution. This reinforces one of the central themes of the novel. Montag explains:

> Even the most cursory examination of this singular period reveals that its key themes are precisely those of *Frankenstein*: there is everywhere a sense of monstrous forces unwittingly conjured up in order to serve the project of progress and the Enlightenment but have ultimately served to call that very project into question. (384)

After the collapse of the French monarchy, chaos ensued. Conservatives and even those who looked to the revolution with optimism began to question its resolve. The Romantic poets who supported the revolution were at least partially to blame.

In 1793, Godwin released *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, which biographer Emily Sunstein defines as a “weighty anarcho-utilitarian treatise” (16). Godwin’s proposal included the arguments for the abolition of all traditional institutions of political authority. Everest explains the radical nature of Godwin’s *Political Justice*:

> *Political Justice* offered a somewhat self-consciously abstract outline of ‘political anarchy,’ which objected to all constraints whatsoever on the operation of pure reason (constraints such as governments, family, emotions). In a famous example Godwin
insisted that, confronted with a situation where it was possible to save from death by fire either a respected philosopher, or one’s own wife or mother, reason would dictate that the philosopher be saved, because that course of action would yield the most benefit to people in general. (19)

Frances Winwar explains the impact that the book had: “His *Political Justice* came out at a price that only members of a perfected society could have afforded. Men on the seat of power read the prophecies of the dreamer and, shaken, clamored for the suppression of such dangerous heresies” (4). William Pitt, Britain’s prime minister from 1783 to 1806 (Mullett 454), remarked, “A three guinea book could never do much harm among those who had not three shillings to spare. He [Pitt] was mistaken” (Winwar 4). The book’s theologies quickly spread among the lower and middle classes. Sunstein adds that at the time of its release, “perhaps no work of equal bulk ever had such a number of readers” (16). The book ignited a new form of political activism led by the first wave of Romantic writers.

Godwin’s work was the most influential book of the 1790s among the radical-intellectual community which included William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Blake. Coleridge and Robert Southey, author of *Joan of Arc*, even planned a “Godwinian” colony in western Pennsylvania (Sunstein 16). The utopian democratic community in America was to be named “Pantisocracy, or equal rule by all” (Damrosch 520). Winwar explains their dream as follows: “Inspired by their own innocent living, they, too [like Godwin], would produce imperishable works..., they would found a robust and glorious race – of the perfect man!” (5).

The ideology behind this Godwinian colony is strikingly similar to Victor Frankenstein’s plan to improve humanity using modern science. As Victor completes work on his creature, he feverishly reveals the passions that drove him: “A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (58). Unfortunately for Victor he “succeeded” in his scientific endeavor, but like many of the Romantics’ dreams, his vision produced terrible results.
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As the violent excess of the Reign of Terror became more widely known, support for the revolution faded and a spirit of conservatism spread throughout England. Many blamed the extremist poets who had publicly supported revolution for inciting the violence. One of the period's most renowned critics, William Hazlitt, blasts the liberal writers in his article “Lectures on the English Poets” which appeared in the weekly newspaper The Examiner:

Mr. Wordsworth is at the head of . . . the Lake school of poetry . . . . This school of poetry had its origins in the French Revolution, or rather in those sentiments and opinions which produced that revolution . . . . Our poetical literature wanted something to stir it up, and found that something in the principles and events of the French Revolution. (Everest 78)

Attacks on the liberal poets became commonplace in the press. In a scene suggestive of the many film adaptations of Frankenstein, a mob spurred on by the growing hostility towards the “damned Jacobins” surrounded Wordsworth's house protesting against his radical views. The angry mob ultimately drove Wordsworth and his sister out of their home in Nether Stowey (58).

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was born in 1797 during the climax of the turbulent events that shaped the Romantic period. Critic Robert M. Ryan cites the importance of recent analyses of Mary Shelley's writing in defining the period:

Mary Shelley merits attention in any study of the British Romantic period, not only because of her close personal relationship with many of the poets and political philosophers who exemplified what her husband called ‘the spirit of the age’ but also because she developed her own original critical perspective on the values represented by that spirit, a perspective that has earned increasing attention in more recent revaluations of British Romanticism. (179)

Keeping with the “spirit of the age,” Mary uses Victor Frankenstein as a “symbolic substitution” for the Romantic
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Keeping with the “spirit of the age,” Mary uses Victor Frankenstein as a “symbolic substitution” for the Romantic
poets and their ideological leader. Victor is a composite of the
writers of the Romantic period who tried to re-shape the traditional
political and class structure with their works. Shelley analyzes the
ethical nature of the writers and suggests that they, like Victor,
should take moral responsibility for their creations. The relationship
between Victor and the creature can be viewed as a metaphor for
the relationship between the artist and his work. Mary Shelley
supports this metaphor in the 1831 introduction to her novel. While
thinking of "her ghost story" (24), Mary envisions, for the first time,
Victor's response to his creation: "His success would terrify the
artist; he would rush away from his odious handwork, horror-
stricken" (24). Many writers who supported the French Revolution
were also "horror-stricken" when they heard reports of the
bloodshed and disorder during the infamous Reign of Terror.

Victor Frankenstein and the Romantic poets share a
common curse: guilt, regret, and an infinite longing for the way
things were before their "works" were released. Victor's regret
and longing for the past begins the morning after he completes his
"monster." This is also when he begins to quote Romantic poets.

Walking the streets in a daze on that dreary morning, Victor recites
a passage from Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

My heart palpitated in the sickness of fear; and I hurried on with
irregular steps, not daring to look about me:

Like one who, on a lonely road,
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread. (62)

The first part of the Ancient Mariner's penance is complete because
he has seen the error of his ways and now loves all of God's
creatures. Victor has also seen the error of his ways. From that
morning on, Victor no longer has any desire to pursue his scientific
endeavors. Although he agrees to make the creature a bride, his
conscience does not allow him to do it: "I had resolved in my own
mind, that to create another like the fiend I had first made would
be an act of the basest and most atrocious selfishness; and I
banished from my mind every thought that could lead to a different
conclusion" (Frankenstein 148). Victor's quest for omnipotence
poets and their ideological leader. Victor is a composite of the writers of the Romantic period who tried to re-shape the traditional political and class structure with their works. Shelley analyzes the ethical nature of the writers and suggests that they, like Victor, should take moral responsibility for their creations. The relationship between Victor and the creature can be viewed as a metaphor for the relationship between the artist and his work. Mary Shelley supports this metaphor in the 1831 introduction to her novel. While thinking of “her ghost story” (24), Mary envisions, for the first time, Victor’s response to his creation: “His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handwork, horror-stricken” (24). Many writers who supported the French Revolution were also “horror-stricken” when they heard reports of the bloodshed and disorder during the infamous Reign of Terror.

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has ended, but like the Ancient Mariner he is not yet forgiven for his sin. In the hope that others will learn from his mistakes, the Mariner must relive the events of his voyage through hell over and over as he wanders the earth telling his story. He does this because he knows “a frightful fiend” is following him, the “fiend” of guilt for killing the holy bird and the horror of God’s fury. Victor too is compelled to tell his story as he scours the earth for his creation.

Peter Kitson describes the influence the French Revolution had on Coleridge’s poem: “The ideas of guilt and restoration which are implicit in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner were developed by Coleridge over several years and grew out of his observation of the career of the French Revolution” (25). He adds that “Coleridge was disillusioned with the French Revolution but also convinced of the depth of his own country’s guilt... During the composition of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner Coleridge was brooding upon his own sense of personal guilt” (27). The connection between the poet’s responsibility for his work and Victor’s responsibility for his creation becomes even more clear, as Mary Lowe-Evans highlights the impact of the poem on

_Frankenstein_: “[The] Rime of the Ancient Mariner is still one of the most effective treatments of the sins of an overreaching individual against the community. Mary Shelley would recall Coleridge’s haunting words and use them to reinforce the same theme in _Frankenstein_” (3). Iain Crawford illustrates the connection between the texts in greater detail:

> The relationship between the two texts is perhaps more profoundly seen in their common focus upon the forces of creative obsession, the demonic capacities of the human mind, and the destructive energies released when these two clash. (255)

In Victor’s case the “frightful fiend” can be interpreted literally as his creation lurking in the shadows, but what truly haunts him is his guilt for creating such a creature: “I felt as if I had committed some great crime, the consciousness of which haunted me... but I had indeed drawn down a curse upon my head, as mortal as that of crime” (142). Victor continues to reinforce this theme of regret throughout his narrative.
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As Victor reflects on the death of Justine Moritz, for example, he remarks:

I no longer see the world and its works as they before appeared to me. Before, I looked upon the accounts of vice and injustice, that I read in books or heard from others, as tales of ancient days, or imaginary evils; at least they were remote, and more familiar to reason than to the imagination; but now misery has come, and men appear to me as monsters thirsting for each other’s blood. (88)

The phrase “(m)onsters thirsting for each other’s blood” foreshadows a letter written by Mary in 1848 which describes dreadful events in Europe. In her meticulously constructed novel, Victor’s new reality reinforces the regret and longing for the past that both he and the Romantic poets felt. If Wordsworth or Coleridge and the French Revolution are substituted for Victor and his “monster,” it becomes clear that this passage describes exactly how the Romantic poets felt about the revolution they had embraced. Charles Schug explains the paradox of their curse in greater detail:

The implied author of *Frankenstein* impresses us with a sense that the formulation of values is continuous, that we can never achieve a final formulation (this is the position of the Romanticist), and so is Frankenstein himself in the same situation: he recognizes that his pursuit of the monster is both futile and compulsory. It is futile because its ultimate aim is to achieve a finality that is impossible, since what he is chasing is not really his physical creation, the monster, but some solution to the terrible and monstrous moral questions that he has previously tried to avoid but which were merely exacerbated while the monster one by one murdered the people Frankenstein loved. (615)

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by the Romantics that are all about regret and longing for the past:
Percy Shelley's *Mutability* (1816): "Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow [ . . . ]" (qtd. in Schug 92) and William Wordsworth's *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey* (1798): "- The sounding cataract / Haunted him like a passion [ . . . ]" (qtd. in Schug 137). Coleridge suggested to Wordsworth that he should shape his destiny as the great poet of his age by writing an epic account of the effects of the French Revolution on their own generation. This autobiographical poem - about what Everest describes as, "the pristine elation and enthusiasm of those years with a saddened, elegiac tone, subtly endowed by the perspectives of a now older Englishmen looking back in sober disenchantment . . ." (qtd in Schug 13) - became known as "The Prelude" (qtd in Schug 12-14). Controversial literature did not end with the French Revolution, nor did it end with the first generation of Romantic writers. Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Keats continued to blaze a new trail against the religious, political, and social conventions of the day. Percy Shelley, in particular, stood steadfast in the face of what he viewed as tyranny and oppression.

In her introduction, Mary Shelley thanks her husband for his "incitement" in forming *Frankenstein*: "I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband, and yet for his incitement, it would never have taken the form in which it was presented to the world" (25). If one reads her letters written around the same time as this introduction, the passage takes on new meaning. Percy Shelley's "incitement" has been assumed to mean encouragement to turn her ghost story into a larger work, the novel we as know it today. This may be true; however, Mary Shelley is also implying that Percy himself - with his radical views and determination to change the world - has incited Mary to fashion her characters and her moral theme as she did. While Percy Bysshe Shelley continued to test the political boundaries of society with his radical poems, Mary Shelley counted the cost of political upheaval.

One central theme of *Frankenstein* appears in many of Mary Shelley's letters: "seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid
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One central theme of *Frankenstein* appears in many of Mary Shelley’s letters: “seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid
ambition” (183). She may not have been able to discourage her husband and her father in their devotion to radical political philosophy, but one letter reveals that she was able to prevent her son Percy from following in their footsteps.

In a letter to Alexander Berry she writes:

You say in your letter ‘Were you a young Man of Percy’s age & fortune you would devote yourself to scientific pursuits & the improvements of your estates, instead of embroiling yourself in politics.’

These words have reached us at an opportune moment – When I wrote last in March, Percy was canvassing the boro of Horsham – he was then a single Man, Now he is married – he has given up politics & is about to settle in the country – on his estate. (363)

Mary’s injunction to “seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition” is clearly reflected in this letter; it is the same theme that she expands in her novel *Frankenstein*. Her message was directed to her father and his radical circle in her novel; it was later directed to her son through her letters.

*Just as Walton rebelled against his father by becoming an arctic explorer and Victor rebelled against his father by pursuing nature’s secrets, Mary rebelled against her father by writing *Frankenstein* as her personal response to his radical views. She voiced her conservative politics in a complex manner that has remained disguised in print for more than a century. The novel’s fictional characters are composites of the overreaching writers of the Romantic period by whom Mary was surrounded as a young child. She analyzes the ethical nature of these writers and implies that they, like Victor, should take moral responsibility for their creations. With the recent discovery of the letters and the subsequent critical revaluations of her works, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley has finally emerged from the shadow of the great Romantic writers and taken her rightful place among them.*
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Submission Guidelines

The Oswald Review is a refereed, international undergraduate journal of criticism and research in the discipline of English. Published annually, The Oswald Review accepts submissions in the field of English from undergraduates.

- 150-200 word abstract.

- Three copies of each manuscript and a computer disk containing the finished version of the submission in Microsoft Word (IBM compatible).


- All copy should be provided in current MLA format, justified left only.

- Two title pages:
  
  - one to contain title of work only
  
  - one to contain author's name; address (both local and permanent); phone number & email address; name and address of college or university; name and department of endorsing professor.

- Professor’s note that the work is original for undergraduate course and free of plagiarism

- Length: 5-20 pages.

- Materials will not be returned. SASE for results.

- Postmark Deadline: March 31 (or nearest business day) for submissions. Notification July 30.

- No electronic submissions.

Send inquiries and submissions to:

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