Probing the Psychological Mystery of *Frankenstein*

Paula R. Feldman

*University of South Carolina - Columbia, feldmanp@mailbox.sc.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/engl_facpub

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Publication Info

Published in *Approaches to Teaching Shelley's Frankenstein*, ed. Stephen C. Behrendt, 1990, pages 67-77.


Included by permission of the copyright owner: The Modern Language Association

This Article is brought to you by the English Language and Literatures, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.
Students in my English Romanticism class complain on first reading *Frankenstein* that this so-called horror story is not very frightening. I use the Socratic method to help them discover for themselves the interesting psychological dimensions that embrace the true horror of the story. We become literary detectives trying to solve a mystery, trying to make sense of things that don’t seem, on the surface at least, to make much sense.

After spending some class time eliciting students’ initial observations about the book and then discussing some of the more obvious topics, I point out that several puzzling circumstances in this novel bear further scrutiny. "Why," I ask, "does Victor Frankenstein, having worked for years to create a living being, abandon it just at the moment he accomplishes his dream?" Students initially respond that Victor flees because the Creature is hideously ugly, but I remind them that someone who has been working with dead body parts is not likely to be squeamish. I read aloud the opening paragraphs of chapter 5, asking them to listen for clues to an explanation that makes more sense. Soon they realize that what is frightening is not how the Creature looks but *that* he looks: not until his dull yellow eye opens does Victor seek to escape. Victor seems frightened by the autonomy of his Creature; he can no longer control it as he did when it lay lifeless on the table. Sometimes, a student will point out the similarity between Victor’s feelings and those a parent might experience with a newborn child.

We leave this subject temporarily to concentrate on another curious occurrence. "How," I inquire, "does Victor know, after the death of young William, that the Creature is the child’s murderer?" "Because," students volunteer, "he sees him." "Now wait a minute," I protest. "What kind of evidence is that? He sees him? Would you expect that statement to hold up in a court of law?" Acknowledging that they wouldn’t, they point out that, all the same, Victor Frankenstein is correct—the Creature is, indeed, the murderer. "Still," I observe, "the last time he saw the Creature, he had just been created and had only just opened his eyes. How does he know anything about this creature’s character, let alone that he is a murderer? By what process," I persist, "does he discover the truth?" Students admit that the process does not appear to be a rational one involving induction or deduction. I read aloud Victor’s thoughts in chapter 7: "Could he be . . . the murderer of my brother? No sooner did that idea cross my imagination than I became convinced of its truth. . . . He was the murderer! I could not doubt it. The mere presence of the idea was an irresistible proof of the fact" (73–74). "What kind of a thought process is this?" I prod. Students recognize now that it is intuitive, as if Victor is looking
inside himself for the answer. I point out here that while Victor Frankenstein’s method of solving the murder would seem, on reflection, to be highly unusual, nevertheless, we, as readers, do not balk when we encounter it in chapter 7. I hint that the author may have prepared us in some way to accept it.

Elizabeth’s murder is the third strange circumstance I encourage my students to consider. “How is it,” I ask, “that although the Creature clearly warns Victor that he will be with him on his wedding night, Victor goes right ahead and marries Elizabeth, showing no concern for the danger in which he will be placing his bride?” Students repeat Victor’s protestations of obtuseness. They call to mind his egotism. “Come on,” I say, “who could be that obtuse? Who could be that egotistical? Victor isn’t stupid.” They agree that Frankenstein’s actions are puzzling. “Could it be,” I propose, “that Victor marries Elizabeth precisely in order to murder her?” Students initially resist this suggestion. For further evidence we look to the dream Victor has just after bringing his Creature to life:

I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. (57)

Victor’s kiss is the kiss of death, and this passage clearly prefigures Elizabeth’s fate as his bride. Students remain skeptical.

I call their attention to Victor’s admission, just after deciding that the Creature is the murderer of young William: “I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror . . . nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave and forced to destroy all that was dear to me” (74). I read this passage aloud, slowly, and then hold up a picture of Boris Karloff portraying the Creature. “Who is this?” “Frankenstein,” they gasp, recognizing the frightening implications of that response.

The stage is thus set for me to introduce the notion of the double. Students can now see how Victor Frankenstein’s flight from his newborn creation makes sense as a scene of unendurable self-confrontation. We talk about how Victor has achieved his self-imposed isolation in Ingolstadt by repressing something in himself that the Creature embodies; the Creature is forced to lead a life of his own, acting out what Victor is struggling to keep from consciousness. I call attention to the many times throughout the novel that Victor falls asleep or loses consciousness and how he explicitly
acknowledges his own culpability when he first sees the corpse of each of the "monster's" victims. For instance, Justine's imminent death provokes him to acknowledge, "I [am] the true murderer" (84). He greets the lifeless form of Henry Clerval with the telling exclamation, "Have my murderous machinations deprived you also, my dearest Henry, of life? Two I have already destroyed; other victims await their destiny..." (169).

Next, I point out a passage in which the Creature reminds Frankenstein of their physical kinship ("my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance" [125]) and challenge the class to look for deeper similarities. Students generally notice that both are isolated, intelligent, and originally innocent, but that Victor's and the Creature's innocence has been blasted along with their hopes. They recognize the two figures as Byronic: tortured by consciousness, longing for oblivion, unable to remove the curse that plagues them or (for most of the novel) to die. Both come eventually to mourn the loss of all those they love.

I call attention to the similarity of many of their utterances. For example, each in his own way cries to a mocking universe, "if ye really pity me, crush sensation and memory" (142), just as each describes himself repeatedly as a "miserable wretch." Each, motivated by blind revenge, destroys himself as he seeks the annihilation of the other. One is the slave of the other and at the same time master and executioner.

Next, I ask students to describe the characteristics that differentiate Frankenstein from his epipsyche. They notice that while Frankenstein is accepted by society but chooses isolation, his Creature is an outcast but yearns for companionship. They generally see Frankenstein as selfish and egocentric but his Creature as benevolent, sympathetic, and kind, transformed only by the cruelty and neglect of society. Students contrast the tumultuous early life of the Creature with the harmonious childhood of his creator. Someone usually volunteers that the Creature looks deformed on the outside but Frankenstein suffers from an internal deformity. They note the asexuality of Frankenstein and the implied sexuality of his Creature, as well as the added cruelty that Frankenstein has a bride while denying one to the Creature. Sometimes a student suggests parallels between the Creature and Freud's concept of the id and between Frankenstein and Freud's concept of the ego. While Frankenstein is ambitious to distinguish himself in the pursuit of knowledge, the Creature wants only to love and be loved. Students find it useful to see these polarities drawn on the board in the form of two opposing lists.

Such lists help clarify what the two characters embody, as do explicit statements in the novel. For example, Frankenstein himself observes that his crime is not the pursuit of knowledge in itself but the fact that such a pursuit "has a tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste..."
for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix.” As such, it is “not befitting the human mind” (54). Frankenstein allows his ambition to suppress his natural need for human love and sympathy. By denying its worth, he forces that essential part of his being to pursue a solitary, incomplete existence.

I follow up these insights with another question: “What does Walton have in common with these two?” As students list resemblances, I prompt them to see that Walton possesses characteristics of both Frankenstein and his Creature. Walton aspires to distinguish himself in the realm of knowledge, but his ambition is tempered by a love for his fellow beings. In hopes of accomplishing his mission, he chooses isolation from his family and home, yet he feels this separation strongly and yearns for companionship. The apparently tangential Walton turns out to be one of the most important characters in the book. He is Mary Shelley’s model of the healthy, integrated personality—someone who can strive for distinction but who turns back when his actions might harm others.

Once I have established for students that it is legitimate and productive to probe the psychological dimensions of the novel, I do so at length. This novel, I argue, is truly a horror story, but not of the usual sort. Despite its imperfections, it has remained popular because it articulates the psychological horror of the author’s own emotional landscape and, in so doing, subliminally touches responsive chords within us all.

Frankenstein is, in fact, autobiography told in the language of dreams. It expresses the unresolved contradictions of Mary Shelley’s life. Until relatively recently, critics virtually ignored the psychological aspects of the novel and the import of its having been inspired by a nightmarish vision. Yet Frankenstein not only has the character of an extended and elaborated dream; like a dream, it expresses in veiled terms the innermost wishes and fears of its author.

I begin our exploration of Mary Shelley’s inner world with the most striking example of her dream life recorded in her journal. There, on 19 March 1815, shortly after the death of her first child, she writes, “Dream that my little baby came to life again—that it had only been cold and that we rubbed it before the fire & it lived” (Journals 1: 70). “Does this dream sound familiar?” I inquire. Students immediately recognize that this vision of a corpse miraculously imbued with life anticipates the famous reverie from whose terrors Mary Shelley would awaken slightly more than a year later to find herself with the germ for Frankenstein. “I saw,” she recalls in her 1831 introduction, “the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion” (x–xi). I sug-
gest that the resemblance between these two visions is not merely coincidental; both derive from a deep, personal preoccupation that finds further expression in the novel and in her life.  

We take another look at this introduction, and I call attention to the passage in which Mary Shelley bids her “hideous progeny go forth and prosper” (xii). “She is referring here to ——?” (I pause to let students complete my sentence.) “Victor Frankenstein’s monster!” they volunteer, blithely tumbling into my trap. “Not at all,” I insist, and, to prove my point, read them the passage immediately following in the introduction: “I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words which found no true echo in my heart. Its several pages speak of many a walk, many a drive, and many a conversation, when I was not alone . . . . ” (xii). Now students see clearly that this “hideous progeny,” this “offspring,” is Mary Shelley’s own novel, her artistic creation. It is a novel about itself and about its author’s relation to it. At its heart lies Mary Shelley’s individual struggle with the act of creation, a struggle characterized by fear as much as by ambition. In a profound sense, the novel is Mary Shelley’s monster let loose.

Students are now receptive to my argument that Mary Shelley’s ambivalence regarding her artistic capabilities is central to the novel. I insist that when Victor Frankenstein promises to “unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation” (47), readers must take “creation” in its widest sense. He is not merely a scientist or inventor. To see him as such would mean ignoring the original vision of the “pale student of unhallowed arts” (my italics) who kneels beside the thing he had put together. Later in the same passage Mary Shelley remarks, “His success would terrify the artist” (x–xi). Casting Frankenstein in the form of a scientist seems to have been a matter of dramatic expediency at a time when the word art could still mean science as well as fine art. Frankenstein, then, is the story of an artist and the artist’s progeny, just as Mary Shelley was herself the child of artists.

At this juncture, I introduce students to pertinent biographical information. From the day of her birth, I point out, Mary Shelley was regarded as “the only offspring of a union that will certainly be matchless in the present generation” (Taylor 1: 19). The daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin could be nothing less than exceptionally talented. However, in the summer of 1816, her promise was as yet unfulfilled. “My husband,” she relates in the introduction, “was from the first very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage. . . . He was forever inciting me to obtain literary reputation, which even on my own part I cared for . . . .” (viii). Years later, she remarks in her journal, “I was nursed and fed with a love of glory. To be something great and good was the precept given me by my father: Shelley reiterated it” (entry for 21 Oct. 1838,
Journals 2: 554). But despite others’ expectations and despite her own will to achieve, she seems to have felt intimidated by the writers surrounding her. She says in her journal, “[I]ncapacity & timidity always prevented my mingling in the nightly conversations of Diodati—they were as it were entirely tête-a-tête between my Shelley & Albe [Byron]” (entry for 19 Oct. 1822, Journals 2: 439). And she describes Shelley as possessing a genius “far transcending” hers.

Now I suggest to students that if we view the ghost-story contest at Diodati against this background, the dream that inspired Frankenstein takes on increased significance. By her own confession, Mary Shelley felt mortified each time she had to admit that her “anxious invocations” had not yet yielded a story (x). But not just any story would do; it had to be worthy of its distinguished company and of her heritage. “In our family,” her stepsister, Claire Clairmont, once remarked, “if you cannot write an epic poem or novel, that by its originality knocks all other novels on the head, you are a despicable creature, not worth acknowledging” (Nitchie 141). If we think of Mary Shelley’s dream, at least in part, as a response to these anxieties, it seems symbolically to express inner fears about her creative capabilities. As an artist, Mary Shelley is horrified to see that what she creates is imperfect; its motion is “uneasy” and “half-vital” (xi). She runs to escape from it, then tries to put it out of her mind, but it returns, and she is forced to confront its odiousness. Despite its intrinsic merit, its countenance is ugly. It is frightful not only because it disappoints expectations by not perfectly embodying the inspiration that brought it into being but because it gives visible, public form to the artist’s inadequacies.

Most students are, by this time, intrigued by what I have told them about Mary Shelley’s life and its relation to the novel. They want to know more. I point out that the waking dream that inspired Frankenstein had nothing of murder in it. Even so, creation and destruction motifs are intimately linked both in the pages of Mary Shelley’s book and in her own experience. Her imagination, I argue, expanded on her original vision by drawing on the psychological material associated with four profoundly disturbing deaths: those of her mother; her firstborn child; her half sister, Fanny Imlay (whose suicide occurred six weeks into the eight-month gestation period of the novel’s composition); and Harriet, Shelley’s first wife (whose suicide took place two and a half months after that).

I caution students that, if it seems curious to think of a nineteen-year-old asserting, “To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death,” they need only recall that Mary Shelley’s birth nearly coincided with the death of her mother. It is not uncommon for children in such circumstances to hold themselves personally accountable for the mother’s death—to feel an unconscious sense of guilt or to feel their birth to be
murder, however inadvertent. Ironically, Mary Shelley's own first experience of giving birth was followed almost immediately by the death of her premature infant. Moreover, she had had warning of her lonely half sister's depression that summer at Diodati, and after Fanny's death she was, like Percy Shelley, filled with remorse and self-accusation for not having been more attentive. During her early life with Shelley, she must have had many occasions for wishing Harriet Shelley dead and out of the way. Harriet's suicide simplified Mary's life considerably. Yet, clearly Mary harbored intense feelings of guilt, which she articulated twenty-three years later in her journal entry of 12 February 1839: "Poor Harriet to whose sad fate I attribute so many of my own heavy sorrows as the atonement claimed by fate for her death" (Journals 2: 560). Students can see from this passage that Mary Shelley felt she had wronged Harriet and concluded that her crime had rebounded, heaping misery on her own life. (Sometimes a student volunteers that Mary Shelley's plight sounds much like Victor Frankenstein's.) At any rate, I argue that Mary Shelley appears to have felt some measure of responsibility and guilt for all four of these deaths, and her submerged response seems to have dictated much of the emotional landscape for the portrayal of murder in her novel. On some level, she must have felt that she, like her character, was a blight on others. Frankenstein, students recall, does not literally murder by his own hand but does nonetheless, bear responsibility. Death haunts him, I suggest, as it must have haunted Mary Shelley.

Near this juncture in our discussion, I can usually count on at least one skeptical student to raise an important objection: "Did Mary Shelley intend all these things you see in the novel, or are you just reading in what isn't there?" This question gives me the opportunity to tell students about the pitfalls of second-guessing authorial intention and about the varied ways in which readers can legitimately interpret a text, despite what the author may or may not have had consciously in mind. As I confess to the students, Mary Shelley probably did not consciously intend to embed in Frankenstein the autobiographical elements we have been noticing. Observing that the creative process is highly complex and that the author's subconscious often plays a crucial part, I ask students, "Have you ever had a dream that seemed to have little significance until a friend suggested an interpretation so obvious you wonder how it could ever have escaped you?" Fiction, I explain, can sometimes be like dreams in that way. An author may be consciously unaware of a work's subliminal sources or, for complicated psychological reasons, may fail to make the connection between her own and, say, a fictional character's situation. But that shouldn't stop readers from making whatever connections the evidence implies. Even so, I acknowledge to students, a psychological reading should not be
undertaken without detailed knowledge of an author's inner life. For such knowledge of Mary Shelley, we must depend on her letters, journals, and other fictional works. Although those interpreting works by living authors may have more direct personal knowledge, all psychological interpretation requires not only extreme care but an acknowledgment that it is highly speculative. In *Frankenstein*, the dreamlike quality of the work seems to invite such an interpretation, as do some of Mary Shelley's own statements about writing.

For example, she writes to Maria Gisborne on 22 November 1822, "Perhaps it would be better not to write at all; but the weakness of human nature is to seek for sympathy" (*Letters* 1: 291). I try to persuade students that *Frankenstein* is as much about sympathy and rejection as it is about creation and destruction—that they are, in fact, two variations on a single theme. Mary Shelley's journals and letters suggest that although she felt guilty about the harm she had caused others, she felt at the same time injured and rejected. Thus, *Frankenstein* is a plea for sympathy and acceptance as much as it is about these human needs.

Drawing on the biographical evidence, I argue that Mary Shelley's familiarity with rejection probably came quite early. Many children in similar circumstances interpret their mothers' deaths as desertion. It is not improbable that Mary Shelley, like Frankenstein's Creature, felt abandoned by the one who gave her life. Godwin, a remote parent, hardly filled the void, and Mary's relationship with his second wife, Mary Jane Clairmont, was difficult at best. Students can see that, growing up, Mary must often have felt overlooked and alone, deprived of the sympathy that comforts most children.

When she eloped with Shelley, Mary must certainly have anticipated some moral indignation. Yet students can see from the evidence I present from her letters and journals that she was genuinely shocked by Godwin's outrage and disillusionment by this unexpected discrepancy between his actions and his ideals. Later she remarks, "Until I knew Shelley I may justly say that he [Godwin] was my God—and I remember many childish instances of the excess of attachment I bore for him" (*Letters* 1: 296). She felt profoundly injured by a rejection coming from the one person whose approval she most desired. She writes to Shelley, "I know not whether it is early habit or affection but the idea of his [Godwin's] silent quiet disapprobation makes me weep as it did in the days of my childhood" (*Letters* 1: 57). That she records having read or reread all the major works of both parents during 1814 and 1815 seems to indicate a desire to be "with" her parents in some meaningful way during those initial years with Shelley (see her reading lists, *Journals* 1: 85–97). Isabel Baxter, her closest girlhood friend, broke
off the friendship at her parents' request. Students see that Mary must have felt increasingly rejected and isolated, like Frankenstein's Creature.

But, I argue, her creative work also helped distance her from others. Recalling our study of the last section of "Kubla Khan," I remind students that in the Romantic myth of the artist-hero, one of the most dangerous aspects of the imagination is its potential for isolating the individual. Proud defiance of conventional life and the insights of an artistic sensibility can be a curse. Blake once expressed the pathos of the artist's dilemma in his famous complaint:

O why was I born with a different face?
Why was I not born like the rest of my race?

(Complete Writings 828)

Moreover, Mary Shelley felt torn between the demands of being a creator, where the act of composition is necessarily solitary, and the demands of being a procreator, a wife and mother, where being with others is essential.

I ask students to turn yet again to the novel's introduction, in which Mary Shelley, recalling her childhood, writes, "[M]y dreams were all my own; I accounted for them to nobody; they were my refuge when annoyed—my dearest pleasure when free" (vii). I tell them that in later life, ironically, these dreams often took the form of introspective brooding and deep depression, causing her to shut out of her life those very people whose affection she most needed. Frankenstein's declaration, "I shunned the face of man; all sound of joy or complacency was torture to me; solitude was my only consolation—deep, dark, deathlike solitude" (86), is of a piece with statements Mary Shelley confides in her letters and journals. She writes, for example:

I am not given to tears; & though my most miserable fate has often turned my eyes to fountains—yet oftener I suffer agonies unsuaged by tears. . . . when to destroy every thing around me & to run in to that vast grave (the sea) until fatigued I sunk to rest would be a pleasure to me. (letter to Maria Gisborne, 17 Sept. 1822; Letters 1: 260–61)

Students can see the very images of this confession anticipated when Frankenstein muses, "[O]ften . . . I was tempted to plunge into the silent lake, that the waters might close over me and my calamities forever" (87).

To Maria Gisborne, Mary Shelley exclaims, "And instead of this [committing suicide] I write, & as I write I say Oh God! have pity on me!" (Letters 1: 261). Frankenstein's lamentations, I argue, are Mary's own,
suppressed in the presence of those around her but poured out on the pages of her novel. Frankenstein revealingly remarks at one point:

I checked . . . my impatient thirst for sympathy and was silent when I would have given the world to have confided the fatal secret. Yet, still, words like those I have recorded would burst uncontrollably from me. I could offer no explanation of them, but their truth in part relieved the burden of my mysterious woe. (177)

These cathartic acts of Frankenstein are much like Mary Shelley’s writing of her novel.

Next I show students evidence of the sharp disparity between the inner and outer world of both Victor Frankenstein and his creator, who describes herself as “one who entirely & despotically engrossed by their own feelings, leads as it were an internal life quite different from the outward & apparent one” (Journals 2: 438). This misleading appearance was a cruel contradiction in the character of a woman who maintains, “I cannot live without loving & being loved—without sympathy—if this is denied to me I must die” (Journals 2: 498). On 11 November 1822, she records in her journal her response to a charge often brought against her by those who knew her best: “[H]ave I [a] cold heart? God knows! but none need envy the icy region this heart encircles—And at least the tears are hot which the emotions of this cold heart forces me to shed” (Journals 2: 444). On the pages of Frankenstein she drew the two sides of her personality in the form of Victor Frankenstein, the artist who coldly chooses isolation, and his epipsyche, the rejected Creature who passionately craves human society and sympathy.

By the end of our study, most students agree that one of the great triumphs of Frankenstein is that it both includes and imaginatively transcends autobiography, speaking to the human condition or, as Mary Shelley herself puts it, “to the mysterious fears of our nature” (ix).

NOTES

1Psychological readings by Ellen Moers (Literary Women), Martin Tropp, and Marc A. Rubenstein were among the earliest.

2For example, see the scene in the novel where Walton initially discovers Victor Frankenstein exhausted and nearly frozen. Frankenstein faints but Walton explains, “We . . . restored him to animation by rubbing him with brandy and forcing him to swallow a small quantity. As soon as he showed signs of life we wrapped him up in blankets and placed him near the chimney of the kitchen stove. By slow degrees
he recovered . . .” (24). At other crucial points throughout the novel, Victor Frankenstein faints and is rejuvenated. This resurrection theme probably owes something to the discussions at Diodati concerning the reanimation of dead matter and to Adam’s dream of God fashioning Eve in book 8 of Paradise Lost. But its personal derivation is also quite clear. For instance, on 5 March 1817, Mary Shelley writes to Leigh Hunt, “I had a dream tonight of the dead being alive which has affected my spirits” (Letters 1: 32).