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Deadbeat Dad: Victor Frankenstein as the Failed Father

In Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1831), protagonist Victor Frankenstein and his relationship to the creature have often been characterized in terms of creator and creation, with Victor trying to usurp women's procreative role or trying to become God through scientifically giving life.¹ Although Victor can be rightly understood as a mother or a creator, he also has a distinct relationship to the creature as a father because of his position in society as a man. Victor assigns himself the role of a creator throughout the novel, but he also likens himself to a father during his creation of the creature: "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No *father* could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" (Shelley 55; emphasis mine). The distinction Victor makes between creator and father is one that research characterizing him as only creator or mother overlooks.² As Victor recognizes, a creator could claim reverence for bringing the being into existence, but only a father could claim his child's gratitude because he is not simply creating life but is also providing the bond of a father. In the early nineteenth century, this bond of a father included legal and moral responsibilities that would not apply to a

¹ Anne Mellor provocatively puts forth the characterization of Victor as a man fearful of female sexuality who thus takes control over the female body to reassert his male control (120). Ellen Moers likens the creation of the creature to the toil of birth in which Victor expresses the physical states of birthing (81). Barbara Frey Waxman adds to this approach, arguing that Shelley, through Victor, "lays bare...the mysterious soul of woman," with reference to Shelley's pregnancy and childbirth metaphors as evidence (15).

² Studies that have focused on fatherhood in *Frankenstein* concentrate more on Victor's relationship with his own father than with his progeny (Veeder 367) and, more generally, have dealt primarily with the domestic relations of the families within the novel (Dussinger 39; Claridge 20).

creator. As a creator, Victor's only duty is to create, not to care for his creation. But as a father, he is legally responsible for the creature's maintenance and morally accountable for his happiness and wellbeing.

Victor, however, fails in his role as father to the creature, which creates new implications for his relationship with the creature. In addition to abandoning his creation, we might say Victor abandons his child. Furthermore, he does not simply fail at fatherhood; he refuses this role and directly denies the creature any chance at social acceptance. Understanding Victor as the creature's father also allows us to see the status of the creature as an illegitimate child, created out of wedlock and outside of the law. Not only is the creature stained by his hideousness, he is also culturally stained by his bastardy and the abandonment of his father. Thus, approaching Victor from the perspective of his role as a father to an illegitimate creature forces a reevaluation of what Victor is to be blamed for. Instead of condemning Victor for creating the creature, we can identify his chief failure as refusing to be a father to the creature, including failing to be legally and morally responsible to him.

Victor's Abandonment of the Creature

Victor's initial abandonment of the creature contrasts sharply with the eagerness he feels during his creation, as he says, of a "human being." He delights in the idea of creating a new species of "happy and excellent natures" and intends to earn their gratitude towards him (Shelley 55). However, as soon as the creature opens his "dull yellow eye," Victor's heart is filled with "breathless horror and disgust" and he is "unable to endure the aspect of the being [he] created" (Shelley 58). It is clear in Victor's description of his horror that it is the appearance of the creature that disgusts him. Many scholars have analyzed the cause of Victor's desertion of the

creature, focusing appropriately on the creature's hideousness.³ Paralleling these analyses, Victor's horror is due primarily to the creature's ugliness, but it could also be understood as his realization and aversion to the fact that the creature does not look like him. Although Victor considered himself a father, the creature does not resemble him, nor any man, and thus Victor feels no paternal attachment to him. Tellingly, Victor abandons reference to him as a human and instead labels him "creature," "monster," and later, a new "species." Victor's utter detachment from the creature because of his appearance lies beneath his failure to raise the creature as his child. After the inanimate creature becomes animate, Victor only ever professes responsibility *for* the creature, referring to him often as "the being whom [he] had cast among mankind" (Shelley 78). But he refuses to claim responsibility *to* the creature. Victor's refusal to be responsible to the creature underlies his subsequent rejection of the creature as his child and his denial of his role as the creature's father.

The Creature's Illegitimacy

Reference to the creature in nonhuman monikers is just one way that Victor demonstrates his rejection of the creature as his child. But to understand Victor's evasion of responsibility, the creature's similarity to an illegitimate child must also be recognized. Victor's creation of the creature outside the bonds of marriage immediately classifies the creature as an illegitimate child. Although it may seem unjustifiable to compare the creature to an illegitimate child since he is produced asexually, Victor's singular passion behind his creation mirrors the lust behind

³ Denise Gigante analyzes the creature's ugliness and its excess through its resistance to the aesthetic theories of Burke and Kant. Suparna Banerjee recognizes the creature's horrid appearance as "the single most important thing about the creature—the reason for his terrible rejection by human society—as well as the most crucial circumstance in terms of the novel's plot (7).

the creation of many illegitimate children. Victor's description of his emotions while fervently creating the creature reflects similar characteristics of a consensual but illicit sexual relationship, including exploration, pursuit, and secrecy. Although Victor often speaks of the horror of his task, he is not recalling a horror that he felt at the time, but one that he is superimposing on past events. Rather, he describes his feelings at the time as those of "eagerness" and "enthusiasm" (Shelley 56 & 57). He says of his pursuit, "My limbs now tremble, and my eyes swim with the remembrance; but then a resistless, and almost frantic impulse, urged me forward; I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit" (Shelley 55). Victor even uses language that is representative of conceiving a child, describing his discovery of how to create life as a "conception" and the result as the "consummation" of his labor. Although Victor has created a child through science, his feelings imitate those that can result in a child out of wedlock, implying the creature's similarity to an illegitimate child.

This status of illegitimacy, according to nineteenth-century British law, implies that Victor is legally responsible to maintain the creature. At the time, an illegitimate child would have been considered one that "is not only begotten, but born, out of lawful matrimony" (Enfield 112). Although illegitimate, the creature would have still had claim to his father's support. According to the British Law of Bastardy of 1809, the father of a child was apprehended and held until he gave security that he would maintain the child (Enfield 113). Maintenance meant that illegitimate children were often raised in parishes supported by the payment of money by the father or by the seizure of his rents or goods if he refused to pay (Enfield 113). The only lawful way to evade this maintenance would be if the mother died, married, or miscarried before the delivery, or if paternity was not identified (Enfield 113). Victor, however, evades this maintenance through keeping the creature a secret from his family and from the law. He also

evades legally supporting the creature through his continual denial of his responsibility to the creature. By not providing the creature with even monetary maintenance, the most minimal level of fatherhood, Victor fails as a father. Moreover, he does not even acknowledge that the creature has a right to such maintenance.

Victor's denial of the creature and of his legal rights is captured in the creature's lack of a name. The creature faces the same social and legal constraints as an illegitimate child even though he is not known to the world. Most significantly, the creature lacks both a first name and a surname. Although illegitimate children would have been given a first name, by law, they would have had no inherited surname and could only acquire one by reputation (Enfield 113). By creating the creature out of wedlock, Victor instantly dooms him to a life without a surname. However, Victor is not following set laws; he is attempting to rid himself of his child and thus barring even a nominal attachment to him. This absence of a common name allows Victor to feel he is not bound to the creature by paternal responsibility. Instead of giving the creature his last name or even a first name, he chooses to call him "demon," "fiend," "devil," or "monster." All of these labels allow Victor to reject the creature as his child because they imply that the creature is not fully human and instead is not only hideous but also malignant. Thus, even at the level of a name, the creature cannot claim Victor as his father.

By creating the creature out of wedlock, Victor also denies him any right to inherit or claim heirs. Even if we allow that Victor did not initially realize his creation of the illegitimate creature denied him the right to inherit his name, Victor strips the creature of his only remaining right when he refuses to create for him a female companion. Like an illegitimate child, the creature "can have no legal heirs, but such as claim by a lineal descent from himself" (Blackstone 249). He is *nullius filius*, a son of nobody, and thus unable to claim any inheritable

blood (Enfield 114). Although the creature does not explicitly say that he wishes to create heirs of his own body, Victor fears that the two creatures will create a “race of devils” that could “make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror” (Shelley 170). By denying the creature a companion on the basis of his fear of a new species, Victor directly refuses to give the creature the chance to create his own heirs and lineage, a lineage that the creature cannot legally claim from Victor. Although creating the creature out of wedlock condemns the creature to illegitimacy, Victor’s refusal to grant the creature his own lineage denies him any chance to have a companion or a family in which he belongs.

Without Victor to maintain him and without a companion to care for him, the creature is left to the wilderness and rejected from society. Although the creature is most clearly ostracized for his hideousness, his status as an illegitimate child also bars him from the legitimate members of society. “Natural” children in early nineteenth-century England were legally and culturally marred by their illegitimacy. Not only were they denied rights of inheritance, they were also socially scorned and separated from legitimate children.⁴ If these children were abandoned, for instance, they would be placed into separate orphanages, removed from legitimate children. One such place was the London Foundling Hospital, which only cared for illegitimate children whose parents were unknown or who had abandoned them (McClure 16). It was feared the illegitimate children would contaminate legitimate children because they were begotten in sin and were believed to have inherited their parents’ weakness (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 584). Illegitimate children were taught their status at the Hospital, for instance, in part through adaptations of the

⁴ Although illegitimate children faced legal disadvantages, it was not until the sixteenth century that they also began to encounter social stigmas. These stigmas were due to greater Puritan influence on morals and the conviction that a family should be based on the stable relationships of the parents, which also equaled a stable society (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 206).

Psalms. They memorized and sung hymns for public performances that referred to their inheritance of sin:

Wash off my foul offence,
 And cleanse me from my Sin;
 For I confess my crime, and see
 How great my Guilt has been.

In Guilt each part was form'd
 Of all this sinful frame;
 In Guilt I was conceiv'd and born

The Heir of Sin and Shame. (quoted in McClure 232)

Although the creature is clearly separated from society for his hideousness and must thus seek shelter in nature and away from people, he is also on the fringes of society as a bastard. The creature speaks of his separation when he says to Victor, “You had endowed me with perceptions and passions and then cast me abroad an object for the scorn and horror of mankind” (Shelley 141). This scorn that the creature recognizes mirrors the ostracism illegitimate children faced for being considered sinful and an “affront to morality” (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 583). Thus, the creature’s illegitimacy creates a cultural stain that further separates him from society.

Victor’s Moral Responsibilities

Defining the creature as an illegitimate child, however, does not free Victor from moral responsibilities. Rather, as an intentional creator of a child, even though the creature can be seen as illegitimate, Victor also has moral duties that a father of an illegitimate child of the time may not have been imagined to. In his reflections on his own childhood, Victor shows awareness of a

parent's moral obligation to his child. He recognizes the impact of his parents on his life: "I was...their child, the innocent and helpless creature bestowed on them by Heaven, whom to bring up to good, and whose future lot it was in their hands to direct to happiness or misery, according as they fulfilled their duties towards me" (Shelley 35). Victor even names himself a "creature," subject to his parent's will, yet he still asserts his parents had a duty to raise him. Victor, however, as the creature's father, directs the creature's fate to one of misery and fails in his duty to raise the creature. Although he recognizes the responsibility of a parent, he does not fulfill this role for the creature. The distinction could be made that Victor recognizes a parent's duty to a creature "bestowed on them by *Heaven*" and cannot recognize his duty for a creature that he creates himself. However, the intentional act of creating a child places even more responsibility on Victor, not less. He cannot claim surprise at having a child; he is instead bound by his intent to create life and is thus morally responsible for raising and caring for his creature.

Victor's moral responsibility to the creature can be understood through nineteenth-century prescribed notions of the ideal father, often shaped by the period's conduct literature or conducts of life. This literature reveals the guiding role a father should fulfill towards his child. In a section on "natural relations" addressed to "fathers," Lord Chesterfield's manual, *The Accomplished Gentleman* (1782), depicts a parent's "duty to support" the "being thou hast produced" (73). The manual illustrates the mutual reliance between a child and his parent; the support of the parent will determine "whether the child of thy bosom shall be a blessing, or a curse to thyself; an useful or a worthless member to the community" (Chesterfield 73). As a father, Victor has the responsibility to guide the creature and support his wellbeing, which will directly determine the creature's happiness and contribution to society.

In the literature of the period, ideal fathers were often juxtaposed against “bad” fathers in order to further emphasize the good, a comparison that can also highlight Victor’s failings as a father. A father in early nineteenth-century England was expected to be a “man of feeling” who embodied sensitivity and stoicism. James Fordyce’s *Addresses to Young Men* (1777), a conduct manual that was widely reprinted in England, Ireland, and America throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries⁵, encouraged these traits in men and portrayed the father as a “guard” of his son’s wellbeing, mind, and virtue (39). Fordyce describes the destruction a son could fall into without the protection of his father, explaining the temptation of “Vice,” which creates overpowering desires and pleasures that can only give way to meanness and misery (39-45). Fathers, as protectors, were expected to provide affection, material care, companionship, and moral and cultural instruction to prevent vice from defeating virtue (Doolittle 31). Those in the genteel circles, in which Victor belongs, would have been criticized by the literature of the time for not supporting and protecting their children, as seen in a letter from the *Lady’s Magazine* (1783). A Mrs. Grey remarks, “There is something like cruelty in bringing children into the world, without being able to provide for them, to pay for their education, &c” (qtd. in Bailey 280). Even a poor father would be prosecuted by the poor law authorities and be made to reimburse the parishes or resume support of his child if he tried to abandon his child (Giovanopoulos 46-7).

In character, the “bad father” was not necessarily too strict or authoritarian, but was rather indifferent to the needs of his children. Part of this indifference was his refusal to support his children rather than his inability to do so (Bailey 280). Victor exhibits the characteristics of a

⁵ The popularity of Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1765), undergoing at least fourteen editions by 1814, is a testament to the wide circulation of his subsequent manual, *Addresses to Young Men* (Kerrison 53).

father who has the means to take care of the creature, but refuses to raise and care for him.

Although this is his chief crime against the creature, Victor also embodies the excess and selfishness of inadequate fathers. In a personal account from the eighteenth century titled *A Narrative of the Life and Distresses of Simon Mason, Apothecary*, Simon Mason provides an example of a negligent father. He condemns his own father's excessive gambling and drinking and relates the deleterious effects this had on his childhood (Mason 13). Although Victor is not a gambler or drinker, he nevertheless allows his selfish pursuits to overshadow the care he should show the creature.

These selfish pursuits are characterized by Victor's ambition, which even he recognizes as detrimental, but which he does not understand in relation to its effect on the creature. Victor moralizes about his ambition as a warning to Walton, the explorer who relates Victor's story: "If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind" (Shelley 56). Although repenting for his ambition in creating the creature, he remains ignorant of his selfishness against the creature, as seen in his feelings before and after the creative act. Before Victor creates his creature, he believes that when his creation is complete, his "labours would soon end" and he promises himself "exercise and amusement" (Shelley 57). Victor's concern only for himself is most evident in the days and months directly following the night the creature awakens. The day after he gives life to the creature, he again believes his work is over, telling his friend Henry Clerval, "I hope, I sincerely hope, that all these employments are now at an end, and that I am at length free" (Shelley 61). Victor's selfishness is most apparent in the language he uses to describe giving life to the creature, calling the act an "occupation," his "labour," and "these

employments,” all focusing on his personal toil, of which he is now “free.” Although Victor is subsequently confined for several months by a “nervous fever,” he begins to recover and enjoys the exercise and amusement he promised himself with Henry, feeling “unbridled joy and hilarity” (Shelley 72). All the while, the creature is left to fend for himself. As we later learn, the creature’s first days and months were spent alone in a sense-driven haze with no one to teach him about the world, a direct result of Victor’s claim that he is “free” from the “occupation” in which he labored. Victor’s belief that his work is finished after he has created the creature demonstrates his ignorance of the care the creature needs and displays not only the selfishness of his ambition, but also of his actions following the creation of the creature.

Victor’s Evasion of Paternal Responsibilities

Victor’s fervent refusal of his role as a father and his evasion of his paternal responsibilities is most clear in the language he uses to describe his relationship to the creature. After the creature awakens, Victor abandons any further use of the word “father” and instead refers to himself as “creator” and “author.” Victor frequently uses these titles when the creature pleads with Victor to let him relate his life’s story. In this same exchange, the creature calls Victor “author,” “creator,” and “natural lord and king” (Shelley 102-3). This language emphasizes that Victor’s denial of fatherhood is so strong that even the creature cannot name him father; he can only refer to him in terms that suggest distance and dominance, words that characterize their relationship.

However, this is not to say that the creature does not identify Victor as his father. After learning how to read through his observation of the De Lacey family, the creature is able to decipher the papers he took from Victor’s laboratory and says to him, “I learned from your

papers that you were my father, my creator; and to whom could I apply with more fitness than to him who had given me life?" (Shelley 141). Not only does he realize that Victor is his father, he also recognizes Victor's paternal duty to him and the "mutual bond" that they are supposed to share. In his observation of the De Lacey family, the creature learns of "the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds" (Shelley 124). He continues and relates that he had then asked himself, "But where are my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses" (Shelley 124). The creature specifically feels the loss of a father and mother, one of which Victor could have provided him with.

The creature seeks out this familial connection in his approach to the blind father of the family he considers his protectors. Within his narrative, the creature reveals his awakening to the world and the benevolence of his unmarred character. He observes the De Lacey family and his natural kindness urges him to secretly help them. After learning language from overheard conversations and observing their familial relationship, he begins to question his own origins and seeks not just sympathy, but a paternal relationship with the blind father of the De Lacey family. But when the son discovers the creature speaking with his father, he is filled with "horror and consternation" and he "dashed [the creature] to the ground and struck [him] violently with a stick" (Shelley 137). It is this second denial of fatherhood from the De Lacey father that changes the creature from kindness to vice. He recalls, "For the first time the feelings of revenge and hatred filled my bosom," and he declares "ever-lasting war against the species, and, more than all, against him who had formed [him], and sent [him] forth to this insupportable misery" (Shelley 140 & 138). Although the creature is spurned by the De Lacey family, it is chiefly Victor's denial of him that causes the creature to become vengeful and miserable.

The ability of Victor's actions to directly influence the creature's happiness stems from their parent-child relationship. As both the creature and Victor recognize, Victor, as a father, has the ability to inspire the creature towards virtue. When he agrees to hear the creature's tale, he explains, "For the first time, also, I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness" (Shelley 104). Although Victor speaks of his duties in terms of "creator" not "father," suggesting that he still refuses to consider his parental role as a father to the creature, Victor nevertheless understands he is in control of the creature's happiness because he imbued him with life: "I ought to render him happy" (Shelley 104). Likewise, he also has the ability to direct him towards vice. Not only was a father's duty towards his child prescribed by conducts of life, but it was also a legal concern. In the Law of Bastardy, a child was expected to "owe subjection and obedience during [his] minority, and honour and reverence ever after" (Enfield 111). This is due, however, to parents who have protected their child's weakness of infancy and have supported his "sustenance and education" (Enfield 111). By the end of the creature's tale, however, Victor chooses to again abandon the creature and refuses his duty to aid in the creature's happiness, condemning him to misery.

The creature directly exposes this connection between a father and his ability to control his child's actions when he gives Victor a second chance to decide his fate: "On you it rests, whether I quit forever the neighbourhood of man and lead a harmless life, or become the scourge of your fellow creatures, and the author of your own speedy ruin" (Shelley 104). He places his life in Victor's hands and Victor, impassioned by the creature's tale and his recognition of his duties, agrees to give the creature what he desires: companionship. The creature wants to "become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which [he] is now excluded" by

sharing his life with a female creature “as hideous as [him]self” (Shelley 150 & 148). But in his agreement to fulfill the creature’s command, Victor speaks of his responsibility in terms of his role as creator: “Did I not as his maker, owe him all the portion of happiness that it was in my power to bestow?” (Shelley 148). Victor still does not recognize that his duty to the creature is one of a father and decides to grant the creature a companion out of the “justice” he feels is due to the creature. Acceding to the creature’s wish allows Victor to further evade his fatherly responsibilities. Although Victor feels the creature deserves justice for his misery, he does not acknowledge that it was his abandonment that first caused such misery. Failing to recognize his paternal role allows Victor to abandon the creature for a second time.

The pivotal moment that distinguishes Victor’s denial of fatherhood as intentional is when he reneges on his promise to create a female companion for the creature. The creature sees it as his “right” to have a companion in which he can “live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for [his] being” (Shelley 147). He speaks of the gratitude that he would feel towards man if he accepted him and lived with him in the “interchange of kindness.” He also speaks of the gratitude he would feel towards Victor if he creates for him a companion: “Let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit!” (Shelley 148). This gratitude parallels the gratitude that Victor sought in his creation of the creature, and creating the female creature is an opportunity for Victor to earn the gratitude of his child. However, instead of granting the creature a female companion, Victor decides to rip apart his creation midway through its construction.⁶ When he is first creating the creature, Victor speaks of the gratitude that the new species will feel towards him. But in his creation of the female creature, he now fears that “future ages might curse [him]

⁶ Mellor interprets this scene as Victor’s reassertion of male control over the female body (120). This interpretation aligns with research that characterizes Victor as a mother figure, but it ignores his denial of his relationship to the creature.

as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race” (Shelley 171). In this moment, Victor may be realizing the responsibilities of a creator, but he still does not recognize his responsibility as a father. If he had, then he would have given the creature a female companion to secure his happiness and to make amends for his first abandonment of him. Although it might be possible to forgive Victor for his initial desertion of the creature, his refusal to create a companion for the creature even though he knows he has the power to make the creature happy exposes his utter opposition to his role as a father. Victor’s refusal of his responsibilities dooms the creature to vice and causes the death of his family, himself, and the creature.

Conclusion

Analyzing Victor’s relationship to the creature as one of a father causes us to read his abandonment of the creature as similar to the desertion of a child and as a failure in his moral and legal responsibilities. Moreover, this reevaluation of Victor’s paternal role refocuses blame onto his abandonment of the creature, not onto his creation of him. Through the creature’s repeated pleas for companionship and sympathy, it is clear that if Victor had claimed the creature or given him companionship, he would not have caused the same kind of misery. If we were meant to condemn the act of creating the creature, then the creature would have been evil from the moment life was imbued in him. Instead, he is naturally compassionate and benevolent and only becomes vengeful and harmful because of Victor’s denial of him. The problem lies in Victor’s failure as a father, not in his creation of life. This can also be seen in the ease in which Victor abandons the creature compared to the difficulties in creating him. Although many obstacles confronted him, nothing stopped Victor from creating the creature—not his family,

professors, friends, the gore of the project, nor his own repulsiveness in the labor of it. But it only takes the hideousness of the creature as his “illegitimate” son to stop Victor from caring for him.

Evaluating Victor in terms of his parental ugliness and the creature for his moral ugliness creates new implications for not only Victor’s treatment of his progeny but also for textual, historical, cultural, and biographical readings of the novel. Instead of understanding Victor only as a creator or mother, his role as a father brings new readings to the text about his moral and legal responsibilities and also implies the difficulty his society faced in enforcing the duties of a father. Victor’s paternal role also culturally stains the creature with illegitimacy, creating new implications about the creature’s hideousness and exclusion from society. As a creature produced from corpses and stitched together to form a massive figure, he is visually hideous. But as a creature produced out of wedlock, he is also morally hideous; he is an illegitimate child. The creature’s illegitimacy also creates new implications for historical and cultural readings of the text, suggesting the limited legal rights for illegitimate children in nineteenth-century England as well as the social stigma they faced. Furthermore, understanding the creature as illegitimate adds to the biographical readings of the novel, emphasizing the illegitimate children in Shelley’s life.⁷ The parental politics at play in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* redefine Victor’s role and expose the creature’s stained status as an illegitimate child, changing how we understand Victor’s relationship to the creature and creating new implications for future readings of the novel.

⁷ Shelley was surrounded by illegitimacy. Her half-sister was illegitimate, her stepsister had Lord Byron’s illegitimate child, and she herself had two children with Percy Shelley before marrying him (Seymour).

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