

The Body Project: Anatomy, Relationships, and Representation
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The Death of Maternity: Decaying Female Bodies in Mary Shelley's Fiction

In this paper, I examine the trope of the dying woman in Mary Shelley's early works, including *Frankenstein*, *Mathilda*, and her short fiction. Critics are in general agreement that two of *Frankenstein*'s essential subjects are the trauma of creation and the dire consequences of child abandonment. Mary Shelley's fiction is riddled with dead mothers and young women wasting away as a result of male action. Maternity is appropriated by patriarchy in Mary Shelley's fiction; this usurpation of motherhood is always at the expense of the female body. Mary Shelley creates worlds in which procreation is male-centered and results in the destruction of otherwise fertile female bodies.

The deaths of young women plagued Mary Shelley's life. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft died within a month of giving birth as a result of an infection related to unsanitary obstetric conditions. In addition, she lived through the deaths of her niece Allegra, her half-sister Fanny Imlay, and her daughter Clara, all within the first two decades of her life. These painful losses are reflected in her writing, as young women are systematically killed off. In *Frankenstein*, the older mother, Caroline, is sacrificed to pave the way for the younger, more fertile Elizabeth. Once Victor has mastered male-centered creation, both Elizabeth and Justine can be eliminated. Victor's phallogocentric creation is grotesque and disturbing, not only because he animates dead flesh, but because he immediately abandons his "child." *Frankenstein*'s use of the body ultimately serves as a metaphor for the destructive force of all male-dominated creation, including artistic creation.

Furthermore, I contend that these bodies serve as a metaphor, also, for the more general condition of women in the early nineteenth century. Young women are quite literally "shut away" in two of her short tales "The Bride of Modern Italy," and "The Invisible Girl." In *Victor Frankenstein*'s descriptions of Elizabeth, she is barely human, called a "pet" and a "favourite animal." The female companion which Victor has promised to provide his creation is essentially aborted. *Frankenstein*'s creation, like nineteenth century women, is abandoned, unloved, neglected, and disenfranchised.

Again, this assessment could stem from autobiographical data. In the wake of her mother's death, Mary's father, unintentionally William Godwin destroyed Mary Wollstonecraft's lingering reputation in the composition of her *Memoirs*. Furthermore, as their daughter Clara became ill and died, Percy Shelley found himself flourishing artistically while Mary was left to grieve. The same was true for the death of her niece Allegra by her sister Clara and Lord Byron. Throughout her life, Mary Shelley saw how

the deaths of young women bolstered the creative faculties of the men who professed to love them. In other words, the death of the young women gives creative fuel to men.