

'In My Own Mode': The Intersections of Identity in *Frankenstein*

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“Oh, that I had for ever remained in my native wood, nor known or felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst, and heat!”
 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1818

The outer narrative frame of *Frankenstein* consists of Robert Walton’s letters sent from Russia to his sister who lives in his native England. He laments his friendlessness and confesses his apprehensions for his future: he desperately wants the glory of discovering the northern pole, “a part of the world never before visited,” which he believes to be a utopia, “a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe” (Shelley 7). He finally finds a friend when Victor Frankenstein becomes stranded in the ice while tracking the being he created years before. Walton’s letters to his sister then become a manuscript of Victor’s narrative.

Walton notes of his new friend, “such a man has a double existence,” because Walton still sees traces of Victor’s former glory on his presently emaciated, weathered face (17). His double existence is also seen in the juxtaposition between his membership in the human race and his status as the creator of a being who seriously threatens humanity. This creation also has a double, or perhaps even triple, existence: he is an animal, a child, and a human, though to what extent he embodies each of these identities is debatable. By tracing the intersections and implications of the possible identities of the creation, and by analyzing Shelley’s authorship— with the supplemental philosophy of another British writer, Virginia Woolf— I hope to add something to the vast, rich body of scholarship on this “great flawed text” (Spivak 259). By the end you may notice that, like Woolf, I say “I don’t know” quite a lot (Solnit 96).

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“Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
 Our meddling intellect
 Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
 We murder to dissect.”
 William Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned,” 1798
 (quoted by Pinker 461)

Victor admits to Walton, “the dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials,” and he asks, “who shall conceive the horrors of my silent toil, as I... tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay” (34, 33)? Though Victor was a conscientious scientist, the language describing his life-giving experiments is intentionally ambiguous; as a critique of excessive individualism, Shelley hesitated to give too much concrete detail lest a reader should try to mimic the disastrous experiment. Thus, readers never know to what extent the slaughter-house furnished the materials that would form the creation’s body. If the creation is partly composed of non-human animals, *Frankenstein* may be asking us to break the human-life taboo, which dictates that “an identifiable human’s right to live is not negotiable, and the value of the life cannot be deliberated upon” (Pinker 423-24). Discussing animal rights movements, cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker writes, “an ethical calculus that gave equal weight to any harm suffered by any sentient being, allowing no chauvinism toward our own species, would prevent us from trading off the well-being of animals for an equivalent well-being of humans—for example, shooting a wild dog to save a little girl” (474). Where, he asks, would it end? At oysters? Slugs? Termites? Earthworms?

Much of the language in *Frankenstein* alludes to the creation as something not entirely human. When Victor discovers that his youngest brother was murdered, he claims that “nothing in *human shape* could have destroyed that fair child” (Shelley 50, my emphasis). Still ruminating and grieving, he again states that “every *human being* was guiltless of this murder” (53, my

emphasis). When the creation tries to elicit De Lacey's sympathy, De Lacey replies that it would "afford [him] true pleasure to be serviceable to a *human creature*," but when his children return to the cottage, they obviously do not regard the creature as a human; they are terrified of his appearance and beat him, and they sell the cottage the next day (94, my emphasis). The creation shares with Victor that he asked himself, "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination" (89)? He cites the attack in the cottage as the impetus for "everlasting war against the *species*": he has finally decided he does not belong in humanity (95, my emphasis).

Over the course of the novel, Victor too becomes increasingly alienated by the creation's systemic murders of the people he loves, and by the enormous guilt he feels in having brought the creature into existence. He admits that it was "a selfish pursuit" that had "cramped and narrowed" him, and he "saw an insurmountable barrier placed between [himself] and [his] fellow-men" (45, 113). The dynamic between creator and creation shifts in the novel, as the creation realizes that he is in some ways physically superior to humans. While his countenance is repugnant and terrifying, the size of his body and the musculature and frame underneath his skin enable him to run and swim extremely quickly; he is also much hardier than humans and is able to live in desolate places. Of course, he also has the power of his consciousness and his mind, which he uses to appeal to his creator for a companion. Victor then becomes the slave, and the creation becomes his master (120).

Victor says, "I am a blasted tree; the bolt has entered my soul: and I felt then that I should survive to exhibit, what I shall soon cease to be— a miserable spectacle of wrecked humanity, pitiable to others, and abhorrent to myself" (114); however, he has the privilege of hiding his perceived monstrosity behind a normal, attractive human physiognomy. "Most species don't have faces or expressions that elicit our sympathy," writes Pinker, like a puppy's head-tilt or the

seemingly intelligent, knowing eyes of a chimpanzee (457). I would argue that there are certain situations where the faces or expressions of fellow humans prevent us from sympathizing or empathizing, because of our enculturation or biases. For example, we are unaccustomed as a culture to seeing faces which depict pure, unadulterated rage—annoyance is much more common. Indeed, I found it hard to imagine what gnashing one's teeth would look or even feel like when I read that the creation was doing this in rage. Regardless, the creation's humanity is ignored or denied; he is an other, and "even when not an enemy, [the other] is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who sees" (Sontag 72).

Victor appeals to a Genevan magistrate for resources to "detect and punish" the creation. After recounting his tale, the magistrate asks, "who can follow an *animal* which can traverse the sea of ice, and inhabit caves and dens, where no man would venture to intrude" (Shelley 144, my emphasis)? Victor replies that he believes the creature is nearby, always keeping watch over his movements, and "if he has indeed taken refuge in the Alps, he may be *hunted* like the chamois, [an Alpine antelope] and *destroyed as a beast of prey*" (my emphasis). Also noteworthy is the creation's status as a vegetarian: he says, "my food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and kid, to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment. My companion will be of the same nature as myself, and will be content with the same fare" (102-3). Perhaps he makes this dietary choice because he recognizes that he may be composed partly of animals, and wants to avoid cannibalism. At any rate, his abstention does not necessarily stem from a desire for purity or peace, because he commits some decidedly impure and chaotic crimes; Pinker has debunked the myth that vegetarianism is always interchangeable with humanitarianism.

The pain and violence of the creature's birth linger when he is animated, recovering, and trying to make sense of the world. He shares, "I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew,

and could distinguish, nothing; but, feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept” (70). Morgan notes that “most debates about the cause of the creature’s destructive behavior attribute it either to his isolation and maltreatment, or to his unnatural origin.” Like much else in the novel, it is unclear how Shelley feels about the nature versus nurture debate. The creation believes that both have hindered him irreparably, for nature—his genotype(s)—resulted in the “fatal effects of this miserable deformity,” his hideous phenotype (79). Nurture, or his upbringing, was no kinder to him: “the patriarchal lives of [his] protectors caused... expressions to take a firm hold on [his] mind,” expressions like the “greatest ardour for virtue” and “abhorrence for vice,” which only make his descent into vice (his killing sprees) more painful (90). He speculates, “perhaps, if my first introduction to humanity had been made by a young soldier, burning for glory and slaughter, I should have been imbued with different sensations.”

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“It’s frightening to think that you mark your children merely by being yourself... It seems unfair. You can’t assume the responsibility for everything you do — or don’t do.”
 Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Belles Images (Beautiful Images)*, 1966

Pinker finds many similarities between what he calls the “rights revolutions” for both children and animals; the most striking is that neither group can communicate effectively, and it makes them vulnerable. The creation refers to “the science of words or letters” as “godlike,” because our ability to communicate verbally is a privilege that many other beings don’t get to experience as fully as we do (77). It is impossible for animals to advocate for themselves, and the same is largely true for children. At certain ages they cannot speak, nor can they write, and even if they have learned to talk, they lack the life experience, confidence, and ability to successfully navigate the world without the input and aid of trusted adults. They are at our mercy, subject to our whims. It has even been doubted throughout history to what extent they can feel pain, and

their consciousness has been questioned. Infanticide has been common in human history, and “callousness towards animals is by no means modern. In the course of history it has been the default” (Pinker 456). In the eighteenth-century Voltaire wrote, “Answer me, Machinist, has Nature really arranged all the springs of feeling in this animal to the end that he might not feel? Has he nerves that he may be incapable of suffering” (Pinker 463)? The word ‘child’ can easily be substituted for ‘animal,’ as can a representative of any marginalized group. We are still so intent on othering, on claiming that inner workings must be different if another individual looks outwardly different: “*they* can’t feel pain,” or, “*their* pain is different from *my* pain, mine is more real.” Many children in *Frankenstein* are downright abused: Elizabeth Lavenza was freely given up by her father after her mother died, and there is no evidence that they communicated after her adoption into the Frankenstein family; Justine, the servant of the Frankenstein family, is put to death for a crime she didn’t commit, and before this she was neglected and abused by her mother; Felix and Agatha De Lacey are cheated of their fortunes and must live in poverty with their father; and the creation chokes the young William Frankenstein to death in the forest. The novel depicts traumatic births and lives filled with strife because of familial relationships, but it also depicts families like the De Laceys and the Frankensteins, who are overwhelmingly loving and supportive. As Morgan states, *Frankenstein* is intentionally ambiguous and doesn’t give us many solid, concrete moral truths.

After his aforementioned discussion with the Genevan magistrate, Victor is thought mad and “soothed as a nurse does a child” (Shelley 144). And Victor is, in my mind, still a child. His parents were wealthy and influential, so he led a comfortable life and had the privilege of choice, unlike his best friend Henry Clerval: Victor’s parents were lenient, but Clerval’s demanded that he learn the family business. Clerval was his best friend since the age of five when, as the story

goes, he walked into their house and never really left. Victor was also in an arranged marriage since his preteen years with Elizabeth Lavenza, who was adopted and raised as his sister. He gives off *serious* subliminal messages that he might not want to be married, which Ellen Moers discusses in her essay “Female Gothic: The Monster’s Mother.” Elizabeth deserved better than to be strung along and emotionally neglected by Victor, only to be murdered on their wedding night. As they were married for only a few hours, I assume Elizabeth died as a virgin; I’m assuming Victor was too miserable to attempt any intimacy with a woman and also died a virgin.

Victor’s first active choices occurred after he moved to Ingolstadt; everything else was handed to him, or coincidentally fell into place, and he had to work for nothing. Though Victor seems wise and harrowed by life, he is still young. He left for Ingolstadt at the age of seventeen, and studied and experimented for four years before animating his creation in November 1792 at the age of 21 or 22. In the present time of the outer narrative frame (that of Robert Walton’s letters to his sister), Victor is either 28 or 29, depending on when his birthday is (“*Frankenstein’s* Timeline”).

One has to marvel at Victor’s privilege and naiveté in forming a being who is more physically strong than himself; he had no back-up plan and assumed the creature would be beautiful and grateful for the chance to live. His miscalculations mean that there is no way to subdue the creation unless he tracks him through northern Russia, a climate where the creation is much better suited. The creation always has the advantage over his creator: Morgan argues that Victor is not remarkably skilled at induction, unlike his creation, and notes that many critics have been “astonished at Frankenstein’s obtuseness” when he failed to understand the creation’s threat, “I shall be with you on your wedding-night.” Uttered after Victor destroys his work-in-progress, the female mate for the creation, this threat is targeted at Victor’s fiancée, Elizabeth,

and not at Victor himself. If Victor was indeed the target, the creation could have exterminated him then and there in the Orkneys (Shelley 121). Victor was also extremely careless in leaving his notes on his experiment in his coat pocket, which the creation took to wear in the cold. Months later, after the creature learned to read, he understood “every step [Victor] took in the progress of [his] work,” and he relates to Victor when they finally converse, “I sickened as I read. ‘Hateful day when I received life!’ I exclaimed in agony. ‘Cursed creator!’” (90-1)!

This episode—that of Victor’s attempt to seclude himself and create a female mate for his creation—reeks of sexual violence, and his myopia rears its head once more. I cannot imagine the sheer vanity that one must possess to think that one can mimic the complexities of human reproductive systems that have been fine-tuned by millions of years of evolution. I envision his profane fingers sifting, “penetrating into the recesses of nature, to shew how she works in her hiding places” (29) ... He seems to finally embody feminist ideals when he stops his toils to consider how the female creation might feel once she becomes animated: “she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation” (118-9). However, this reflection comes at the expense of the wellbeing of the creature who already exists, and Beauvoir reminds us that “children are not substitutes for one’s disappointed love; they are not substitutes for one’s thwarted ideal in life—they are *obligations*” (566, my emphasis). Then, Shelley has Victor reveal his misogyny and gynophobia only a paragraph later: “one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror” (119). He has a lot of confidence in the hypothetical virility of his creations, even though they are *creatio ex materia*—made from decaying corpses and possibly from body parts in

slaughterhouses— and not *creatio ex nihilo*. Victor sees the male creation looking in the window at his progress, and, “trembling with passion,” Victor “tore to pieces the thing on which [he] was engaged”; the female body is destroyed and discarded like trash. Victor states that he “*almost* felt as if [he] had mangled the living flesh of a human being,” and he gives the half-finished creature a burial in the sea so as not to “excite the horror and suspicion of the peasants” who live in the other huts on the Orkneys (122, my emphasis).

For animals, concepts like virginity and celibacy simply do not apply. These are social inventions which humans use to demonstrate their worthiness and purity in religious settings, as well as in marriages and society at large. While men have subjected themselves to celibacy in the name of religious practice, Beauvoir notes that chastity is overwhelmingly gendered: “man’s ‘anatomical destiny’ is profoundly different from woman’s... Patriarchal civilization condemned woman to chastity; the right of man to relieve his sexual desires is more or less openly recognized, whereas woman is confined within marriage” (386).

If animals don’t find mates or never produce offspring from copulation, it is a sign that something is probably wrong with their genes and they shouldn’t be producing offspring. The choice to not have children is one that only humans can make, and it is only a choice if they have autonomy, are allowed to make their own decisions. Yet even in 2018, not having—not wanting to have—children is seen as a radical choice; I admit I tend to view it that way. I have read many articles written by women in their thirties who complain about their relatives who keep rudely prying into their personal decisions to not have children; they get reminders about time running up and shores drying up. Having children fits in perfectly with capitalism and chasing that American Dream, and if one decides to opt out, their decision is not always met with respect.

This episode marks yet another ambiguous grey area in *Frankenstein*; while his abortion of the female monster may have been a kindness, preventing another unhappy and miserable existence, it still seems profoundly unfair to my sensibilities that a white man made this reproductive decision for his animal/child, effectively snuffing any hopes the creation had of intimacy and love. It is certainly not lost on me, nor is it lost on Beauvoir, that women have been consistently relegated to animality, to nature, and have been infantilized. In fact, Pinker shares that an eighteenth-century critic of Mary Wollstonecraft's work (she was Mary Shelley's mother and namesake) argued, "if she was right about women, we would also have to grant rights to 'brutes'" (465). Though Victor and his creation are both males, each came from the mind of a young woman who was "pregnant at sixteen, and almost constantly pregnant throughout the following five years" (Moers 319).

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"It was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late in the nineteenth century... Publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood."
Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929 (51)

Tyson writes, "we might cautiously speculate on the relationship between the representation of psychological abandonment in the novel and the experiences of abandonment Mary Shelley apparently suffered in her own life" (36). Perhaps Shelley, like the characters she created, had a double existence, too. Who can say with certainty if she was traumatized, guilty, or depressed about her mother's death? From what we know of Mary Shelley's life, it is quite possible that she felt guilt, as her mother died mere days after her birth; it is certain that her childhood was tumultuous because her father's second wife did not get along with her (Moers 324). And it is very possible that Shelley had anxiety about the literary work her parents did; she may have placed a lot of pressure on herself to contribute to the world, to literature and the body

of knowledge, as they did. Being married to a well-known, talented poet and being included in his social and artistic circle, including renowned poet Lord Byron, may have also contributed to anxiety about her talents as a writer. In her journal she wrote, “incapacity and timidity always prevented my mingling in the nightly conversations” between the two male poets (Poovey 344).

Several evolutionary anthropologists— including Randolph Nesse, Arthur Kleinman, Paul W. Andrews, John Price, Leon Sloman, and Edward H. Hagen— study depression, hypothesizing that depression may actually be advantageous for humans, as it helps us avoid psychological pain or stops our motivation so we do not continue trying in hopeless situations. Hagan in particular has studied postpartum depression (PPD), and he found that the three correlates between women who experience PPD are “marriage problems or lack of social support (especially from the infant’s father); problems with the pregnancy, the delivery, or problems with infant health once born; and a prior history of depression and other emotional problems” (326). While unclear if Shelley suffered from PPD after giving birth to her children, she may have embodied the three correlates. Moers notes that “pregnant at the same time as Mary was Percy Shelley’s legal wife Harriet, who gave birth in November to a ‘son and heir,’ as Mary noted in her journal” (323). In February, 1815, Mary “gave birth to a daughter, illegitimate, premature, and sickly.” The child died in March and was never given a name. In her journal, Mary wrote, “dream that my little baby came to life again, that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived. Awoke and find no baby. I think about the little thing all day. Not in good spirits” (324). She “sailed into teenage motherhood without any of the financial or social or familial supports that made bearing and rearing children a relaxed experience for the normal middle-class woman of her day” (325). There are also circulating anecdotes about Percy’s disappointment that this first child was a girl and not a boy.

There is a sense of justice in scientific discoveries and progress, telling us certain truths about the world. I look back on figures like Henry VIII, who divorced or beheaded his wives if they failed to leave him an heir, gently scoffing to myself, because we in the twenty-first century now know that it is in fact men who determine the gender of the embryo who results from sexual intercourse; women can contribute only X chromosomes, while men have one Y chromosome that can form a biologically male fetus. Shelley has Victor exclaim, “none but those who have experienced [making discoveries] can conceive of the enticements of science”; this is ironic because she would have been unable to make advanced scientific discoveries as a woman in the nineteenth century, yet she could conceive of these enticements. The whole novel is a conception of science’s enticements. Shelley has Elizabeth lament and envy Victor because he can travel alone, or in the company of Clerval, and she must stay at home: she “only regretted,” Victor says, “that she had not the same opportunities of enlarging her experience, and cultivating her understanding. She wept, however, as she bade me farewell” (110).

Women being barred from institutions of higher learning was still a huge social problem over 110 years later, in the time of another great female writer and thinker, Virginia Woolf. She documents these experiences—being condescended to and forbidden entry into certain buildings on the campus of Cambridge University—in her 1929 book-length essay *A Room of One’s Own*. I see many similarities between Woolf’s documented experiences and those of the creation in *Frankenstein*. The creation shares, “increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was” (Shelley 91). Any member of any marginalized or disenfranchised group has probably felt this exact thing: dismay at reading works of the past which are products of their time, employing racist terminology or dehumanizing descriptions; one may also feel dismay when skimming a book list for a course and seeing there are no authors

of color or no women writers. The title of Woolf's work comes from its main premise: if women are to be able to write fiction, each needs money and a room of her own. Even more years later, Simone de Beauvoir astutely noted, "it is a criminal paradox to deny women all public activity... and to nonetheless entrust to them the most delicate and serious of all undertakings: the formation of a human being" (567). Toni Morrison points out a similar paradox in American history in her 1988 novel *Beloved*: the absurdity of entrusting female slaves with the care of white children, even having them serve as wet nurses, while simultaneously denying these women their freedom and autonomy, and dehumanizing them and colonizing their bodies. How could women be expected to raise competent human children if they themselves weren't "competent," weren't equals and didn't have the freedom to, arguably, experience all the possibilities of life?

The metaphor which Shelley employs appears frequently in *Frankenstein*, utilized in all three volumes of the novel; it suggests that life can be like art, though none of her characters get to experience it this way. The creation and Victor allude to themselves as the "authors" of their lives, but because their lives are miserable, they are "authors of their own speedy ruins" or "authors of unalterable evils" (Shelley 69, 62). I find this to be immensely empowering; one of the many cruelties of life is that there are no do-overs, but that doesn't mean that one cannot edit their present, to continue the authorship metaphor. This metaphor also blurs the distinction between arts and sciences— is life art or is it science? Is life-giving art or science? Why not both?

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"A man's genius is always, in the beginning of life, as much unknown to himself as to others..."

David Hume, "Of The Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," 1777

Unsurprisingly, Shelley and her husband were avid readers, and her journal—that “chilly and laconic document mostly concerned with the extraordinary reading program she put herself through at Percy’s side” —indicates that she read two works by the philosopher David Hume in 1818, the year of *Frankenstein*’s publication (Moers 321, “Mary Shelley’s Reading: Alphabetical List”). She read one of his works, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, in 1817, which means she was interacting with his ideas during the process of writing and editing her first novel (“Mary Shelley’s Reading: Alphabetical List”). Morgan and other critics—like Patrick J. Callahan, Lawrence Lipking, and James O’Rourke—have noted evidence of Hume’s ideas in *Frankenstein*, as well as the ideas of other philosophers like Francis Bacon and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The essays which most illuminated my reading of *Frankenstein* were “The Stoic” and “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences.”

Hume notes the difficulties of striving to be an artist in “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences”: “if his own nation be already possessed of many models of eloquence, he naturally compares his own juvenile exercises with these: and being sensible of the great disproportion, is discouraged from any farther [sic] attempts” (*Essays and Treatises*). Writing *is* hard, and I cannot imagine writing *Frankenstein* at nineteen years old after having just given birth away from home. It is an amazing feat, and the book, which was published anonymously, was so good that critics attributed it to male writers of the day; of course it was not thought to be the work of a woman.

In “The Stoic,” Hume warns against “eager pursuit of pleasure” because “you more and more expose yourself to fortune as well as accidents, and rivet your affections on *external objects*, which chance may, in a moment, ravish from you” (*Essays and Treatises*, my emphasis). He asserts that “the great end of all human industry, is the attainment of happiness... Even the

lonely savage, who lies exposed to the inclemency of the elements, and the fury of wild beasts, forgets not, for a moment, this grand object of his being.” It was a pursuit of happiness and pleasure which drove Victor to his scientific pursuits, as he wanted the recognition and esteem of his fellow scholars, as well as the admiration and affection of his creation. It is pursuit of happiness and pleasure which leads to the creation’s request for a mate; Victor responds by asking himself, “did I not, as his maker, owe him all the portion of happiness that it was in my power to bestow” (102)?

In “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” Hume determines that “avarice, or the desire of gain, is an universal [sic] passion, which operates at all times, in all places, and upon all persons: but curiosity, or the love of knowledge, has a very limited influence, and requires youth, leisure, education, genius, and example, to make it govern any person.” Victor embodies these requirements and even has an altruistic reason for wanting the capability to “bestow animation upon lifeless matter”: “I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption” (33). Yet Victor still cannot influence the world with the results of his curiosity; he is too terrified at the thought of people finding out he was responsible for the creation’s existence, and even when he finally confesses to the Genevan magistrate, his tale is not believed.

Though there is no direct evidence that Mary Shelley read *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, an essay within entitled “Of the Reason of Animals” can give us a clue to the ideas that were circulating before Shelley’s own time on the accepted capabilities and limitations of animals. The essay spans not even five pages. Hume concludes that “animals, as well as men, learn many things from experience and infer that the same events will always follow from the same causes” (112). It takes many trials—and all end in errors, none in successes—for the

creation to give up on belonging in humanity. Hume also notes in “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences”: “even among brute-creatures, we find, that their play and dalliance, and other expressions of fondness, form the greatest part of the entertainment” (*Essays and Treatises*). However, Hume’s writing must be taken with a grain of salt; truly a product of his time, “Of The Rise” contains problematic lines such as, “as nature has given *man* the superiority above *woman*, by endowing him with greater strength both of mind and body; it is his part to alleviate that superiority, as much as possible, by the generosity of his behaviour, and by a studied deference and complaisance for all her inclinations and opinions.” Woolf’s work provides the perfect rejoinder: “one does not like to be told that one is naturally the inferior of a little man—I looked at the student next to me—who breathes hard, wears a ready-made tie, and has not shaved this fortnight” (33).

Both Victor and his creation do “rivet their affections” entirely on things and people external to themselves. According to Hume, happiness is unattainable when security does not exist; Elizabeth confirms this when she asks Victor, “when falsehood can look so like the truth... who can assure themselves of certain happiness” (63)? To borrow the definition of a much more contemporary writer and thinker who has influenced her own cadre of writers and artists, Joan Didion, neither individual possesses much self-respect. Didion writes that “people with self-respect have the courage of their mistakes. They know the price of things” (145). Victor clearly had no idea just how much his experiment would cost him, and his creation too was swept into a killing frenzy that he was powerless to stop. He laments to Walton, “I was the slave, not the master of an impulse, which I detested, but could not disobey” (159). The creation does not admit how much he loathes himself until he has gone too far and caused the death of his creator. He had “cast off all feeling, subdued all anguish to riot in the excess of [his] despair. Evil

thenceforth became [his] good,” and the price of his crimes is suicide to escape his “feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched” (159, 161). Hume also notes that the “worst enemies of our fellow-creatures inhabit their own bosoms.” Self-respect “has nothing to do with the face of things, but concerns instead a separate peace, a private reconciliation” —the creation’s private reconciliation comes too late, and Walton doubts if it is even sincere (Didion 144).

Of self-confidence Woolf writes,

“life for both sexes... is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself... And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so valuable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to oneself. By feeling that one has some innate superiority— it may be wealth, or rank, a straight nose... for there is no end to the pathetic devices of the human imagination— over other people.
(36)

This is a gendered definition, as Woolf believes men adopt this attitude more than women; from my own experience, women are by no means exempt. So what lot is left for the rest of us? How are we to develop confidence without losing self-respect and alienating others? Perhaps the answer lies in the main premise of the text: the possession of money and a room of one’s own, the ability to focus, to convey what one has learned, to try to make it come out of themselves whole and unimpeded, with no sacrifices of creativity or vision made to “some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve” (105). She proposes that writers should be unconscious of their sex while writing, so that both the woman and the man within can shine through in the writing. “It is doubtful whether poetry can come out of an incubator. Poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father... Such monsters [without both parents] never live long, it is said” (101).

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“Despair is a form of certainty, certainty that the future will be a lot like the present or will decline from it.”

Rebecca Solnit, “Woolf’s Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable,” 2014 (88)

Yet our monster managed to survive for quite some time. He was born in Germany at the university Victor attended in Ingolstadt, then he travelled to the hovel attached to the De Lacey cottage, also located in Germany; the De Laceys were in exile from France. The creature then went to Geneva, Switzerland and rested in the Alps. He also followed Victor and Clerval at a distance when they journeyed. Victor concealed the true reasons for his request to visit England, clothing his “desires under the guise of wishing to travel and see the world before [he] sat down for life within the walls of [his] native town” (109). Of course, Alphonse Frankenstein agrees, “for a more indulgent and less dictatorial parent did not exist upon earth.” It was soon arranged that the trip would take two years, and the pair planned to visit another region of Germany, then Holland, England, and France.

The movement of individuals from one country to another is a significant theme in *Frankenstein*, and Shelley places emphasis on identities like nationality, race, and even religion. Most striking to me is the idea of being imprisoned in a foreign country, which happens to both Victor and to Safie De Lacey’s father. It has been argued that marriage is a sort of imprisonment for women, a new tyranny, and though there is a depiction of one imprisoned woman, Justine, and though women certainly broke laws and committed crimes, due to their status in the nineteenth century as guardians of the home and hearth, I view imprisonment, at least at this time, as a more male-oriented phenomenon. To imprison a man is to make him vulnerable and dependent; in our present culture jokes about bars of soap in male prisons have become commonplace. It is like war in many ways: a denial of humanity, limited access to women, hard

work, dirty conditions... but there is no sense of fraternity or camaraderie, no pride. They are helping their country, but only because they are apart from society and cannot break more laws and cause more damage and pain. Victor allowed Justine to die after she was found guilty for the murder of his younger brother, but he is imprisoned in Ireland after Clerval's body is found there with "no sign of violence, except the black mark of fingers on his neck" (126). He falls into an awful sickness after seeing Clerval. In his ravings he calls himself "the murderer of William, of Justine, and of Clerval" (127). In recounting this episode of his life to Walton, he wonders, "of what materials was I made, that I could thus resist so many shocks, which, like the turning of the wheel, continually renewed the torture," a sentiment expressed often by his creation.

In *How Novels Think*, Nancy Armstrong addresses problems of nationality and violence. She notes that "citizenship... depends entirely on one's ability to harness the very aggression by means of which one expresses one's individuality" (33). And pride, which was one of Victor's motivators in forming the creation, can easily turn to violence. Similarly, as seen in *Frankenstein*, "violence erupts when the individual achieves individuality, hence masculine identity, by subordinating and controlling femininity" (87). If our desires exceed the limits of our social positions, we are in trouble: what we are seeking will never come, and the desire will move from the "domain of ideas to the domain of the body, where it expresses itself as a physical symptom" (82). This phenomenon certainly affects Victor, who inadvertently starved himself and neglected to care for himself while he toiled on his creation, only to fall into a spell that lasted for months and required the nursing skills of Clerval; later, shocked, furious, and devastated at seeing his best friend's corpse, Victor's "human frame could no longer support the agonizing suffering that [he] endured, and [he] was carried out of the room in strong convulsions" (Shelley 127).

Hume too discusses issues of citizenship and nationality in “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences.” Imagining a hypothetical [male] author or philosopher, he writes, “if his own nation be already possessed of many models of eloquence, he naturally compares his own juvenile exercises with these; and being sensible of the great disproportion, is discouraged from any farther attempts, and never aims at a rivalry with those authors, whom he so much admires.” This is applicable to both Victor and Walton; the latter confessed that in his youth he “became a poet... [he] imagined that [he] might also obtain a niche in the temple where the names of Homer and Shakespeare are consecrated” (8). He writes to his sister, “you are well acquainted with my failure, and how heavily I bore the disappointment.” However, due to Victor’s privilege and determination, he is able to attend university in a foreign place; he disregards Cornelius and Agrippa and absorbs new knowledge until he feels he can rival the scientists of his day. Hume concludes, “in short, the arts and sciences, like some plants, require a fresh soil; and however rich the land may be, and however you may recruit it by art or care, it will never, when once exhausted, produce any thing that is perfect or finished in the kind.” This sentiment applies exclusively to Victor, who sought fresh soil but was exhausted after his first ghastly discovery.

...

“I am somebody”

Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Am Somebody 1)*, 2014

The quote which American artist Glenn Ligon uses in his 1992 work *Study for Frankenstein #1* appears in the second volume of *Frankenstein* as the Frankensteins travel closer to the Swiss Alps to enjoy nature and cope with the death of William. The creation meets with Victor and details his coming into consciousness and begins his literacy narrative; it is the only time readers get such a close glimpse of his thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and it is the only

glimpse we see of the time in his life when this monster-child was completely innocent. He tells his creator, “sometimes I tried to imitate the pleasant songs of the birds, but was unable.

Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again” (71, my emphasis).

Using black oilstick, Ligon has stenciled this latter sentence over and over down the expanse of the white paper. Every letter is capitalized, and punctuation is difficult to detect; therefore, the piece reads like a loud mantra or affirmation: sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again... as if repeating it will somehow render it untrue. And when the eye has become used to seeking this phrase, it disappears.

Approximately halfway down the page—the thirteenth line of text— each letter becomes more difficult to make out. They blend and saturate the page, becoming an indistinguishable black mass where small chunks of white paper peek through. Another of Ligon’s works from the early 1990’s is called *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background)*. The letters he stencils are representatives of himself: a stark contrast, an other in a world of painful, sharp blankness.

A college graduate whose work has been exhibited in museums around the world and included in various art publications, Ligon is literally neither uncouth nor inarticulate. But if he chose to reproduce this particular quote from *Frankenstein*, he identified with it, and he knew its viewers would identify with it, too. I certainly did when I saw it when it was displayed at the Saint Louis Art Museum a few years ago. Many of Ligon’s more recent works use neon lights,

paint, and metal supports to create glowing messages, but his 2008 work *(miserable) life #9* demonstrated a return to the stencils and black oilstick. *Slept awoke slept awoke slept awoke...* It often feels, reading *Frankenstein*, that this is how Victor and the creation pass their lives, both living for “revenge, henceforth dearer than light or food” (Shelley 120)!

It is impossible to determine to what extent the creation is an animal, and to what extent he is a human; perhaps it’s not even important, so long as we can say that he seems to have a notion of selfhood, he seems to possess a soul, he can express himself articulately, and he desires friendship, compassion, and love, like any other being. We can recognize that he and his creator were trapped in earthly existences that became more and more like respective hells. Yet, “to designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell, how to moderate hell’s flames. Still, it seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one’s sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others” (Sontag 114).

Victor spent his last months on Earth believing that in his dreams his loved ones were conversing with him, which gave him “respite” and helped him “retain strength to fulfil [his] pilgrimage” (147). He believed they also left the foodstuffs he found as he tracked the creation into colder and colder parts of the globe:

“sometimes, when nature overcome by hunger, sunk under exhaustion, a repast was prepared for me in the desert, that restored and inspirited me. The fare was indeed coarse, such as the peasants of the country ate; but I may not doubt that it was set there by the spirits that I had invoked to aid me. Often, when all was dry, the heavens cloudless, and I was parched by thirst, a slight cloud would bedim the sky, shed the few drops that revived me, and vanish.” (146-7)

While the only explanations I can offer for the rain clouds are luck or Shelley's stylistic choice to add more allusions to the supernatural, the food is left there by the creation. The creation also leaves messages, "marks in writing on the barks of the trees, or cut in stone" which guide Victor and also make him furious (147). One states, "You will find near this place, if you follow not too tardily, a dead hare; eat, and be refreshed. Come on, my enemy; we have yet to wrestle for our lives." Of course, at this moment in the text, readers do not have access to anything the creation is doing; we get another glimpse of his thoughts and feelings in the last pages of the novel, as he witnesses Victor's body moments after he died. But what do monsters do in their free time? Probably what the rest of us do, but I like to imagine him— after trapping four hares (two for himself and two to taunt Victor with) and securing food for his sled-pulling dogs, maybe finding firewood if he was far enough ahead of Victor so that he couldn't see the smoke— curled up in furs in his tent with a book in hand. One has to stay practiced if one is a relatively new reader, especially if one is to leave scathing messages for others.

Victor could go to different countries in the pursuit of knowledge; the creation could physically get himself to these countries, but once there, he would have been deprived of all chances of learning and enriching himself with a live human being. Books are therefore his only chance at a sort of conversation with others. In a different world, maybe the creation would learn to be self-sufficient; he would break into the wealthy Frankenstein estate in Geneva and steal books, money, and a disguise. If all went well, he could safely (without scaring or inevitably killing anyone for once!) get to a place far away from society, while being able to secure any things he needed to survive: he could finally retire from endeavors with humanity and be at peace with books, which provided his initial connection with humanity. Shelley had different things in mind, and *Frankenstein* ends with the creation's vow to set himself on fire, and

Walton's observation, "he was soon borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance" (161). I can't help but think of Pinker's words about valuing souls instead of valuing lives: "the doctrine of the sacredness of the soul sounds vaguely uplifting, but in fact is highly malignant. It discounts life on earth as just a temporary phase that people pass through, indeed, an infinitesimal fraction of their existence. Death becomes a mere rite of passage" (143).

Both Victor and the creation die while detesting their earthly existences, and each has more faith in the future after death, even though they don't know what exactly will come. Each seems to agree with Sontag's sentiment: "the belief that remembering is an ethical act is deep in our natures as humans, who know we are going to die, and who mourn those who in the normal course of things die before us... Heartlessness and amnesia seem to go together. But... there is simply too much injustice in the world. And too much remembering... embitters. To make peace is to forget" — they are ready to forget (115).

Victor contradicts himself before his death, trying to ask Walton to finish his failed mission of killing the creation, while not overtly promoting the ambition, adventure, and discovery which he has been cautioning against in the life-history he has recounted. He advises Walton, "seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries." His "ideas already disturbed by the near approach of death," he questions himself: "yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed" (157). He dies peacefully, "the irradiation of a gentle smile [passing] away from his lips."

The creation expresses doubt about what will happen to him after death, but he wants to lose his memories of the life he has just passed on earth: "I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct... My spirit will sleep in peace; or if it

thinks, it will not surely think thus” (161). Even in death he expects to be alone and dormant. He decides to commit suicide by burning himself, even though he used to enjoy making fires and profiting from their warmth and comfort. Making a fire was one of his first tasks as a new person, and it was frustrating and painful when he burned himself, but ultimately it made him confident in his ability to do something, and it helped him learn more about the world (71). He wishes to die “triumphantly,” to “exult in the agony of the torturing flames” (161). No witness, no evidence that he was ever alive— and no evidence that he actually follows through. Walton witnesses Victor’s death and recorded Victor’s story in letters to his sister, but Victor leaves no heirs and no contributions— no way secure the immortality that humans can secure on earth. The Frankenstein line is all but wiped out, as only one of Victor’s brothers remains. *So were their lives wasted? And does “the world” owe us anything at all, or is it (are they, are we) absolutely careless?*

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“Nothing would be done at all if one waited until one could do it so well that no one could find fault with it.”

John Henry Newman, a contemporary of Shelley’s; 1851

Oxford English Dictionary provides several definitions of “wretched,” which Shelley has both Victor and his creation use to describe themselves; they turn it into a competition, each clamoring to assert, “no, it was *I* who was truly more wretched than *he*, no one has ever been more wretched than I currently am.” Shelley has scattered through her novel lines from Victor such as, “no creature had ever been so miserable as I was,” while the creation says to Victor’s corpse, “blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine; for the bitter sting of remorse may not cease to rankle in my wounds until death shall close them for ever” (Shelley 142, 161).

The first applicable definition of “wretched” within the context of *Frankenstein* is “living in a state of misery, poverty, or degradation; sunk in distress or dejection; very miserable or unhappy.” The second applicable definition is “distinguished by base, vile, or unworthy character or quality; contemptible.” The first invites our sympathy, while the second invites our scorn. Yet Susan Sontag points out, “so far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence” (102). While Spivak finds that there is anecdotal evidence that “Shelley herself abundantly ‘identified’ with Victor Frankenstein,” I find myself rooting for the creation (259). Therefore, I do feel quite impotent in sympathizing for him: if I were a character in the novel, would I treat him any better than anyone else did? If we heed the words of the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, now commonplace in our lexicon, it is clear that the creation was truly more wretched: Victor loved and lost, while the creation never loved at all.

Woolf states, “masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice” (66). How does one access the body of the people? In books, in conversation, and perhaps in travel— perhaps especially in travel. Shelley did all of these, and she had her characters do as much of these as they could. Woolf was also an advocate for meandering, for “the experience of being anonymous and free that big cities invented,” for “the space in which to disappear from the bonds and binds of individual identity” (Solnit 90-1). It saddens me greatly that the creation could never have this experience, and that many today do not have the privilege to enjoy this.

Spivak refers to *Frankenstein* as both “a great flawed text” and, sentences later, “an overly didactic text” — obviously its main message is to have some humility in one’s pursuit of

knowledge, but what is the average modern reader supposed to take away (259)? **To be kind to ugly people? To try not to usurp the role of the other sex? To be unafraid of obscurity?**

Recently, between working, studying, buying groceries, and all the other boring things one must do to be a successful “adult” woman, I finished Rebecca Solnit’s essay collection *Men Explain Things to Me*. Days ago, on April 23, a man drove his van onto a busy sidewalk in Toronto, killing at least ten people and injuring even more. These separate happenings have kept my mind quite busy, especially as reporters at the *New York Times* have found that the driver of the van “expressed anger at women.” Reading this report, I was suddenly made privy to terms— like “incel,” short for “involuntary celibate” — and forums in the darker parts of the Internet where men can vent their frustrations and rage regarding women.

Wasn’t the creation an involuntary celibate? He went on his own killing spree, but because he was created by a female author, his spree wasn’t the result of deep misogyny. While I sympathize for both him and Victor, I don’t want to be either of them, don’t want to live those lives. The goal has always been freedom and liberation: the ability to walk down streets without fear, to speak, to do anything and everything as long as it does not impinge on the life, liberty, or pursuit of happiness of another person. When the creation was denied access to the De Lacey family, he “gave vent to [his] anguish in fearful howlings,” roaming the forest through the night, but he didn’t kill this family who “had broken the only link that held [him] to the world” (Shelley 95, 97). The young Shelley who wrote *Frankenstein* could be called a bad girl, maybe a slut. She was first Percy Shelley’s mistress, after all, and she liked to meet him in the graveyard at midnight next to her mother’s stone; each scholar takes his or her own liberties in hypothesizing what, exactly, the pair did together on those spooky nights. When alive there doubtless existed those who distrusted or disliked (or who wanted to do violence towards) her because she was

intelligent and educated... and because she was a 'she.' Yet the "daemon" she created possesses more humanity than some in our midst today. I don't despair, because the creation's reading list and descriptions of how each text shaped him comprise the majority of the second volume; Shelley's own reading influenced *Frankenstein* immensely. We will continue to read; the ideas will keep circulating around; different works will resonate with, and shape the views of, different people; and we will get better.

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