

Author



Constructing Connectedness: Gender, Sexuality and Race in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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English

Though critical studies of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are numerous, Jessica Hale took up the challenge of using psychoanalytic theory as a critical tool in her textual analysis of the work while drawing connections between gender and racial issues. She is also currently researching the life and works of the twelfth century religious recluse, Christina of Markyate. Jessica enjoys spending time with her family, practicing yoga and visiting the beach. She plans to pursue graduate study in comparative literature with emphases in critical theory and cultural studies.

Abstract

This paper undertakes a critical examination of gender, sexuality, race, and their interrelations in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Using psychoanalytic theory as a tool of literary criticism, it focuses on two layers of concern in Shelley's novel: the local concerns of the nuclear family and the global issues of imperialism and New World slavery. While the progression of human relationships in the novel reveals a subtle critique of nineteenth century domestic life, the representations of race reveal the fears and anxieties present as the British Empire began to crumble. As the novel progresses from anxiety over individual relationships to anguish over larger social issues, from Victor Frankenstein's relationship with Walton to the perceived threat of the annihilation of humankind, a common thread can be detected. The relationships and rhetoric of Shelley's novel reveal the problematic nature of nineteenth century discourses on family and race. At issue in both the domestic and the global spheres is a troubled relationship of sexuality and procreation. By incorporating references to contemporary criticism of *Frankenstein* which suggest that Shelley was very much aware of the social and political tensions surrounding these issues, four relational trajectories are identified which define the relationships depicted in the novel: familial, homosocial, sexual, and racial. These four levels of human interconnectedness reveal the inherent instability of the institutions of family and race that society sought so determinedly to establish as stable and immutable in the nineteenth century.

Faculty Mentor



Jessica Hale's paper examines the intersectionality between gender, sexuality and race in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. While many critics have highlighted the novel's concern with nineteenth century domestic life, Jessica revisits this concern within a larger framework that addresses the forces of globalization, imperialism and New World slavery. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories, Jessica shows how anxieties about family and individuality increasingly give way to larger social and global concerns. Informed by psychoanalytic and postcolonial theories, Jessica's imaginative reading of Shelley's *Frankenstein* clearly demonstrates her ability to work with difficult theoretical texts and concepts. Moreover, the reading reveals her skill as a reader of literary texts and her ability to bring theory and literature together productively.

Key Terms

- ◆ Domesticity
- ◆ Gender
- ◆ Homosocial Desire
- ◆ Psychoanalytic Theory

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Introduction

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, familial borders are encroached upon by the public sphere represented by the economic, political, scientific, and academic worlds. At the time of Shelley's writing, national borders were also threatened by the increasingly interdependent, global economy and the destabilization of the British Empire as slave colonies revolted and demanded independence. *Frankenstein* reflects these tumultuous concerns in its portrayal of family relationships, which are complicated by extrafamilial sexual and emotional ties, and in the creation of a monster who represents a sexualized, racial fear. At the core of these textual tensions, fears and anxieties is a very real, flesh-and-blood female author struggling to articulate her own subjectivity in a male-dominated literary world which assumes that her first great work belongs to her famous husband.

This paper employs psychoanalytic theory as its main theoretical framework. The theories of psychoanalysis can be applied to works of literature as a way of exploring textual meaning. Using the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan to analyze certain aspects of *Frankenstein* helps reveal the ways in which gender and sexuality shape Mary Shelley's representation of the culture of her day.

Domestic and Public Spheres

Domesticity, the wall which separates the "female" domestic space of the novel from the "male" public sphere, is invoked by Mary Shelley not, as some critics suggest, as a utopian solution to the (presumably male) problems of the world, but rather as an articulation of the disastrous results of defining the domestic and extrafamilial spheres as mutually exclusive. Victor Frankenstein's narrative begins with a genealogy. Clearly, Shelley is indicating that questions of family and lineage are to figure importantly in his tale, but the genesis of the Frankenstein family is an unusual one. Victor's father, Alphonse, sees his bride for the first time kneeling by her father's coffin "weeping bitterly" (18). Alphonse takes Caroline under his wing and cares for her as if she were his child, coming "like a protecting spirit to the girl, who committed herself to his care" (18). More a father than husband, Alphonse shelters Caroline "as a fair exotic is sheltered by the gardener from every rougher wind" (19). Caroline is portrayed as a plant capable of surviving only under the careful cultivation of her surrogate caretaker (18). More significant, however, than Shelley's caricature of a weak, submissive wife is her choice to have Alphonse "gradually relinquish all his public functions" in order to become "the husband and father of a family" (17). Domesticity is

incompatible with the "affairs of his country" and "public business" which previously dominated Alphonse's existence (17). The family unit created by the marriage of the elder Frankensteins and reaffirmed by the birth of Victor cannot coexist with the world of politics and public affairs. Private life completely precludes the possibility of public life for Alphonse Frankenstein. Alphonse's political ambitions are incompatible with the role of husband and father. This completely gendered dichotomy creates a tension in the novel between the family and the "outside world" — a world of exploration, adventure, politics, public affairs, academia, and intellectualism — to which women like Victor's wife and mother, confined in their domestic roles, have no access.

Implicit in the very structure of the nuclear family is a hierarchy headed by a father who provides for and protects his wife, and who has complete authority over both her and their children. As critic Steven Mintz points out, in the early nineteenth century, "it was an almost unquestioned premise that...both natural and divine law endowed the father with patriarchal authority as 'head' of a household" (60). Shelley depicts this hierarchy in her portrayal of Caroline Beaufort as a fragile plant in need of shelter "from every rougher wind" and the Frankenstein children as the loyal subjects of their father. When Elizabeth joins the Frankenstein household, she comes as "a pretty present" for Victor, and thus the unequal relationship of Alphonse and Caroline is reproduced in that of Victor and Elizabeth (21). From childhood, Victor views Elizabeth as chattel, saying, "I looked upon Elizabeth as mine...a possession of my own" (21). In the domestic situation of *Frankenstein*, Shelley gives us such a completely gendered representation of weak women in need of male protection and careless men undone by unbridled ambition that the binaries of public and private, male and female, presented in the novel demand to be read as a critique of the binaries themselves. The very family that Shelley sets forth as the embodiment of domestic perfection reproduces in its innate inequalities the dysfunctions of the hierarchical power structure which forces Caroline Beaufort to submit herself to the care and control of her husband, and gives Victor his "pretty present," Elizabeth, in order to perpetuate this domestic perfection (21). Both women yield not only their autonomy but also their lives for the sake of what Shelley terms "domestic affections" (40). *Frankenstein* presents a gendered inequality in which wives yield to their husbands' paternal protection and young girls are given like prizes to the firstborn male. The familial power structure functions only because the women are weaker than the men, and public life is completely separate from private. The tragic deaths of all the novel's female figures and the ambivalence evident in Shelley's vivid descrip-

tions of the pleasures of pursuing knowledge reveal her advocacy of the supreme importance of ensuring the “tranquility of domestic affections” to be as riddled with internal tensions and conflicts as the nineteenth century family itself (40).

Homosocial Relationships

In her introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Shelley writes “many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener” (xxiv). Perhaps her first-hand observation of intimate male friendships provided material for the portrayals of male homosocial relationships in *Frankenstein*. The most intimate and intense relationships in the novel occur not between husbands and wives, but between men and their male friends. These homosocial relationships serve as a foil to the ill-fated familial relationships of the novel, exposing the strengths and inadequacies of the nuclear family. From this perspective, *Frankenstein* can be read as exposing what Berthold Schoene-Harwood calls “the predicament of the individual male psyche under patriarchal pressure” (5). The patriarchal pressure Victor flees is the pressure to be the patriarch in the strictest familial sense—in the role of a husband and a father providing for and perpetually tied to a nuclear family.

Robert Walton, the explorer who records Victor’s fantastic tale expresses his homosocial longing by writing, “I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me, whose eyes would reply to mine” (4). Walton uses the language of erotic desire not to express a longing for a woman, wife or sexual partner, but for a male companion. Considering that he is isolated on a ship surrounded by rugged, seafaring men, Walton’s desire for male companionship seems unusual if not illogical. Yet, he longs for a man “possessed of a cultivated as well as a capacious mind” to meet his need for sympathy and companionship (4). When Walton wishes for a man “whose eyes would reply to mine” he invokes the convention of the romantic gaze (4). In many romance novels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the eyes were pools of desire, and the mutual glance a form of flirtatious, erotic foreplay. The man of Walton’s dreams serves a decidedly unerotic function. Such a friend, Walton asserts, would “repair faults” he perceives in himself and “endeavor to regulate [his] mind” (5). Walton uses the language of erotic desire to describe his longing for an intellectual companion, for someone to help him focus his creative and intellectual productions. Similarly, he uses the language of romance to encompass the entire spectrum of desire that inspires his longing for

“intimate sympathy” with another man (5). Men are incomplete, he intimates, “half made up,” until they enter into an intense male friendship with the potential to complete, balance and “perfectionate” them (13). Instead of presenting women as the proper partners of men, and thus as the proper objects of male desire, Walton shows us a world of homosocial desire in which men supply their own need for companionship, completion, and intellectual stimulation to the exclusion of the feminine. As Walton recounts “the extraordinary merits of this wonderful man,” his friend Victor Frankenstein, within the completely male-dominated narrative frame of Shelley’s novel, it is worth noting that the only female figured in the bleak landscape of the Arctic wilderness is the sister to whom Walton addresses his misgivings, Mrs. Saville. Homosocial desire, at least within the context of Shelley’s novel, represents a space of intimacy and intellectual involvement that is inaccessible to women, and that serves to even more clearly mark the separation of the “domestic female space from the extrafamilial political and economic male space” (Sedgwick 189).

In the case of Alphonse Frankenstein and his friend Beaufort, these spheres collide, and the extrafamilial begets the domestic. Alphonse’s intimate friendship with another man, formed by economic or political interaction, gives rise to his marriage to Caroline. As Schoene-Harwood notes, “Alphonse’s fatherly protection effects his wife’s domestic imprisonment within the framework of enduring female indebtedness and gratitude” (6). It does this and more, representing marriage as a second-best alternative to the intimate male homosocial relationship. Alphonse compensates for the loss of his beloved Beaufort by becoming the lover of his dead friend’s daughter, thus inextricably linking himself to the only living reminder of his friend. Similarly, Victor Frankenstein’s relationship with Henry Clerval provides a living representation of the intimacy Alphonse and Beaufort may have enjoyed. Schoene-Harwood identifies Alphonse and Henry as “men who feel secure enough in their masculinity to display feelings of domestic affection...who seem perfectly balanced in their manliness which incorporates rather than categorically excludes the feminine” (Schoene-Harwood 16). This reading is only partially accurate—Henry and Alphonse both display feminine, nurturing qualities. Alphonse’s embrace of domesticity, however, entails his complete withdrawal from the outside world, and Henry sacrifices his studies for the better part of a year in order to nurture Victor back to health. Alphonse moves from a position of political and economic power to a position of absolute patriarchal power within the domestic space of the Frankenstein family, as Caroline’s protector and surrogate father. There is very little evidence within the

text that Alphonse “incorporates rather than categorically excludes the feminine” (16). Rather, Alphonse relinquishes one role of gendered male power for another.

In the case of Henry Clerval, the text supports Schoene-Harwood’s thesis of a manliness that incorporates femininity. Clerval, like Alphonse, sacrifices his own ambition to rescue Victor when he falls ill. During the nervous fever that confines Victor for several months, Clerval is his “only nurse” (46). This suggests that a man who is willing to sacrifice his own life and ambitions to attend to the needs of his friend is a more than adequate, even superior caretaker than any woman. Yet, even as Clerval protects his friend’s health he seals his own death warrant, dying as a result of the secret he helps Victor hide. Victor’s relationship with Clerval at the moment of his death recalls Walton’s desire for a male friend “whose eyes would reply to mine” (4).

The convention of the gaze figures importantly in Shelley’s representation of homosociality, and a psychoanalytic examination of her use of the gaze reveals the utterly unconventional implications of Shelley’s representation of male homosocial desire. Immediately after Henry dies, Victor sees “nothing but the glimmer of two eyes that glared upon me...sometimes they were the expressive eyes of Henry, languishing in death...sometimes it was the watery, clouded eyes of the monster” (160). The homosocial gaze of mutual desire and sympathy is here transformed into a gaze of death and horror. Deane Franco explains the power of this glance by applying the Lacanian psychoanalytic concept of the power of the gaze to Victor’s relationship with his monster.

In Lacanian terms, “the gaze is the object in which the subject can see himself. More than that, though, he can see himself seeing himself” (Franco 82). Henry gazes at Victor through the eyes of a dead corpse, thus forcing Victor to see himself through the eyes of death. Paradoxically, at this very moment, Victor also imagines the eyes of the monster at the moment of his unnatural birth—“as [he] first saw them” (160). Alternating between death and life, these gazes function as revelations of an interior, unconscious content, and “when Victor encounters the gaze in the Monster’s sight he sees through this his own illusory ego, his own ‘sustaining of [himself] in a function of desire’ [85]” (Franco 83). Victor’s homosocial desire for Clerval and his paternal desire for the child he created are here conflated in a horrific *mélange* of death and birth, human and inhuman, disgust and desire.

Death and the Romantic Gaze

Death and desire are congruent, sometimes even identical trajectories in *Frankenstein*. Early in the novel, Victor dreams of meeting Elizabeth in the street. He embraces her but his kiss kills her, transforming her into the image of his dead mother. This dream is the closest Victor ever comes to sharing any kind of erotic moment with Elizabeth, and it ends with her death. When Victor awakens from the dream, he finds himself caught in the gaze once again, staring into the eyes of his newborn monster. The monster leans over Victor’s bed and “[holds] up the curtain” (43). Victor dreams of embracing his fiancé, but wakes instead to “the miserable monster whom [he] had created,” leaning over his bed in an intimate, potentially sexual posture (43). In the hideous birth scene, Victor becomes the object of his monster’s desire. The newborn monster seeks out Victor in his bedchamber and pulls back the bed curtains in a pseudo-erotic pursuit of his creator. Victor states “I beheld the wretch...and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me” (43). At this moment, Franco notes, Victor “encounters the gaze” (Franco 82). Fixed in the monster’s gaze, Victor’s repressed narcissistic desires are revealed. The gaze of the monster “shatters the illusory mask of the unified ego and brings Victor face to face with the Other” (Franco 84). “The Other” here is in fact the self — his own unconscious (Franco 83). Victor creates his monster as an image of himself, “a being like [him]self” but “of a gigantic stature” (38). Imagining himself as the object of his creature’s adoration, Victor rhapsodizes:

A new species would bless 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 (39).

Why should Victor so completely deserve the gratitude of his monstrous child? Perhaps because in his monster, Victor reproduces himself, the ultimate narcissistic gratification. Fixed in the gaze of his monster, Victor is forced to face the depths of his own psyche. As Franco puts it, “Victor’s monstrous work is the expression, or symbolization of repressed desire” (81). Franco further identifies that desire as the infant’s Oedipal desire for his mother. Perhaps, however, Victor is in love not with his mother but with himself. Stuck in the mirror stage of narcissistic self-indulgence, in love with himself and unwilling to submit to domestication, Victor creates an exaggerated double, a mirror image of himself capable of refusing to submit to the patriarchal forces pressing him to become “the husband and

the father of a family” (Shelley 17). His monster systematically eliminates all of Victor’s domestic ties and responsibilities: baby William, childish symbol of the proper product of sexual procreation, Elizabeth, the saintly symbol of womanhood with whom Victor should be properly procreating, and finally Clerval, the only living person capable of turning Victor’s narcissistic affections away from himself (22). Victor’s desire for the monster and the monster’s desire for his creator exemplify the depths of narcissistic male homosocial longing which not only ignores but deliberately excludes the feminine.

Freud and Frankenstein

In *Frankenstein*, Shelley overtly links death and romantic love, death and procreation, and death and the erotic. Beyond the obvious textual links between sexuality and death, the structure and plotting of the narrative itself parallels the link between the death drive and the libidinal drive in Sigmund Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” If *Frankenstein* is read as an allegory of male usurpation of the female reproductive space, or as Schoene-Harwood puts it, “womb envy,” then the child whom Victor fathers, composed as he is of various body parts stolen from human corpses, is a symbol of death itself being brought to life (15). Victor describes the abnormal procreative act which produces the monster in terms of passionate desire, saying “I had desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation” (42). The erotic overtones of the language used to describe Victor’s passionate pursuit of creation and the language of homosocial desire noted in the previous discussion of the gaze make it clear that the monster is an object of simultaneous desire and revulsion. Even though he is not the product of a “normal” sexual union between a man and woman, the monster’s creation has sexual overtones. Furthermore, in the body of the monster, sexuality and death are inextricably linked. The monster’s murderous acts themselves have a certain sexual charge. When the monster kills William, his urge to “seize him” is a violent impulse based nonetheless on a desire to connect with another living being (122). After he kills William, the monster’s attention is drawn to the miniature portrait of Caroline Beaufort around the child’s neck:

“In spite of my malignity it softened and attracted me. For a few moments I gazed with delight on her dark eyes, fringed by deep lashes, and her lovely lips; but presently my rage returned; I remembered that I was forever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow and that she whose resemblance I contemplated would, in regarding me, have changed that air of divine

benignity to one expressive of disgust and affright” (122).

Desire for the woman in the portrait is transformed into rage as he reflects on his own sexual deprivation and imagines the rejection that would result if she were to return his gaze. Looking for a hiding place, the monster encounters Justine Moritz sleeping in a barn. His rage is awakened, once more by imagining the gaze of a woman. Anticipating her reaction “if her darkened eyes opened and she beheld [him]” the same rage that filled him at the thought of Caroline Beaufort “regarding [him]” overtakes the monster once again (122-3). The monster leans over Justine in a seductive posture, whispering in her ear “Awake, fairest, thy lover is near—he who would give his life but to obtain one look of affection from thine eyes; my beloved awake!” (123). This sexual play-acting demonstrates once again that the gaze is a function of desire. He decides to hunt down his creator and demand that Victor create a being that “would not deny herself to [him]” (123). The monster states that he is “consumed by a burning passion which [Victor] alone can gratify” (122). The catalyst for this burning passion, described in unmistakably erotic language, is the murder of the child William, and the transformation that, in the monster’s own words, occurs “as I fixed my eyes on the child” (122). Gazing at the portrait of the beautiful Caroline Beaufort, the monster revises his account of why he murdered William—not “to silence him” or to exact “eternal revenge,” but because he was “deprived the delights” of erotic love (122). The monster clearly associates his violent, murderous acts with sexual deprivation. Pretending to be Justine’s lover as he plots to frame her for murder and knowing that under “the sanguinary laws of man” she will almost certainly die, the monster experiences “a thrill of terror” akin to sexual excitement (123).

As Leo Bersani notes in his book *The Freudian Body*, “the suffering of others provides...a ‘relatively powerful emotion, even though it is of a distressing nature,’ an emotion which produces sexuality” (41). If Bersani’s interpretation of Freudian theory is applied to the monster, then the suffering of his first victim, young William, could indeed be the catalyst for “an emotion which produces sexuality.” The fact that this passage provides the first indication of the monster’s libidinal drive (previously he has shown no distaste even for unpalatable food and coarse living conditions) as well as his first demand for sexual companionship (rather than mere human sympathy) supports a reading which interprets the monster’s violent impulses, suicidal desires and developing sexuality as originating from the same source: his inability to connect with his creator or with any other living

being. Bersani's work analyzing Freud's "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" further identifies a counter argument running through Freud's essays that "sexuality [is] not...originally an exchange of intensities between individuals, but rather a condition of broken negotiations with the world, a condition in which others merely set off the self-shattering mechanisms of sadomasochistic jouissance" (Bersani 41). From his creator's rejection to the cottagers' horrified reaction, Frankenstein's monster exists in "a condition of broken negotiations with the world." In this passage, it is clear that the innocent William "merely set[s] off the self-shattering mechanism of sadomasochistic jouissance." The monster is created to be Victor Frankenstein's double, a being "like himself" but with such an imposing physical body that he is able to make his presence felt in the world in a way Victor simply cannot. When the monster realizes the impossibility of achieving any human connectedness, he chooses instead to seek release through the powerful emotion created by the suffering of others, an emotion which simultaneously "produces sexuality". In fact, the monster's sexual drive, his desire for a companion to be not a friend but a sexual object, is produced in this scene by the broken interaction with William. This explains why the monster's explanation of William's murder changes, and why his motive for the murder is transformed from revenge to sex.

In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud identifies "in the mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle" (605). The dynamic of repetition that occurs in *Frankenstein* can be interpreted as an illustration of Freudian repetition. The premise of Freud's work is that "the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle" (594). All mental processes, Freud suggests, are concerned with either "an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure" (595). "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" is an attempt to explain why, if all mental processes are guided by the pleasure principle, the "universal experience" of human life is filled with so much unpleasure (596). Freud answers this dilemma by positing the existence of "something that seems more primitive, more elementary, and more instinctual than the pleasure principle" (605). This "something" is the "compulsion to repeat" (605). Freud argues that the compulsion to repeat arises out of "an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things" (612).

Freud applies this principle of organic inertia to all living things, arguing that "the aim of all life is death" (613). This instinctual "death drive" is inextricably linked to the compulsion to repeat, and the compulsion to repeat is a function

of the death drive's attempt "to restore an earlier state of things" (605). Freud further notes that the "sadistic component in the sexual instinct" is also related to the death instinct and the repetition compulsion. Freud proposes the idea that "sadism is in fact a death instinct which, under the influence of the narcissistic libido, has been forced away from the ego...it now enters the service of the sexual function" (621). Bersani explains this dynamic: "if erotic stimulation depends on the perceived or fantasized commotion of others, it becomes reasonable to put others in a state of maximal commotion" (42). The monster puts "others in a state of maximal commotion" when he frames Justine and murders Clerval and Elizabeth. Following William's murder, the monster is obsessed with sexuality, with his "burning passion" to possess "a companion...of the same species" (123). Denied sexual gratification, the monster repeats the act of murder, displaying that very "presence of a sadistic component in the sexual instinct" which can, in Freud's terms, "dominate an individual's entire sexual activity" (621). The "thrill of terror" (Shelley 123) which fills the monster as he plots Justine's destruction can thus be read as a function of "the sadistic instinct, whose aim is to injure the object" (Freud 621).

Clerval and Elizabeth also die as a result of this externalization of the monster's instinctual, internal death drive, which, "forced away from the ego...enters the service of the sexual function" (Freud 621). According to Freud, sadism is a result of this "ambivalence of love and hate in erotic life" (621). Even Victor identifies passion as the source of the monster's violent tendencies. Fearing for the lives of his family and friends, Victor worries that the monster might use them to "satisfy his sanguinary and merciless passions" (150). Victor also identifies Clerval's strangulation as a repetition of William's death: "when the mark of the fingers was mentioned I remembered the murder of my brother and felt myself extremely agitated" (153). What Victor identifies as "strange coincidences," a Freudian reading reveals to be a manifestation of the compulsion to repeat (153). The sexualization of the monster's violent acts is especially evident in Elizabeth's death scene. Abandoned by her husband, Elizabeth is completely helpless when the monster comes to ravish her. Her wedding night is replete with sexual imagery, but the consummation that occurs is deadly rather than life-producing. The wedding night brings not a sexual union of husband and wife with its promise of procreation, but a bloody death scene. Victor discovers Elizabeth "lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed" (239). Her "relaxed form" lies in a sexual posture "on its bridal bier" (239). The sexual congress of the "bridal bier" should signal the beginning of a new procreative union.

Instead, Victor's murderous double destroys the possibility of marriage, family and domestic tranquility for Victor and Elizabeth.

Bersani notes that "the extreme logic of sexual pleasure is its explosive end" (46). This explosive end finds its ultimate realization when the monster's death drive turns inward, returning to his ego. The monster describes this internalization to Walton:

Neither yours nor any man's death is needed to consummate the series of my being and accomplish that which must be done, but it requires my own... I shall collect my funeral pile and consume to ashes this miserable frame...I shall die. I shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume me or be the prey of feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched (197).

The monster asserts that death will be the consummation of his passion—in death his "unsatisfied and unquenched" feelings will finally achieve release. Bersani explicates Freud's theory of the death drive by arguing that "if sexuality is constituted as masochism, the immobilization of fantastic structures can only have a violent denouement... masochism is both relieved and fulfilled by death" (46). This explains the monster's suicidal tendencies, the reason why he kills Elizabeth even though he realizes that in so doing he is "preparing for [him]self a deadly torture" (195). This masochistic self-torture can only find resolution in suicide. Imagining his death, the monster says, "I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly and exult in the agony of the torturing flames" (198). The "explosive end" of the monster's masochistic tendencies is his exultation in his own agony provided through suicide by fire.

Gender and Sexuality

The issues of gender and sexuality portrayed in Mary Shelley's novel have significance not just in psychoanalytic terms, but also in the larger social and cultural context of the nineteenth century, as the expression of a racialized sexual fear. The threat posed by the monster is perceived by Victor as a sexual one, and it echoes the sexual threat posed by the intermixing of races. In her work, critic Anne Mellor notes that Shelley clearly associates Frankenstein's creation with "the project of colonial imperialism" (Mellor, *Mary Shelley* 113). Walton's glorious dream of reaching "a part of the world never before visited" recalls the mellifluous prose used by the travel writers of the day to romanticize the project of colonial expansion (6). Like the first European explorers to reach the continent of Africa, Walton imagines

himself as the first to uncover the secrets of the "unexplored regions" toward which he travels (6). Interestingly, the European explorer Walton describes the monster in racialized terms. The "traveler" he sees seems to be "a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island" (9). His aspect sharply contrasts with that of Victor, whom Walton immediately identifies as "a European" (6). In a remarkable parallel to the racial ideologies of Shelley's day, the monster has "the shape of a man" but is never considered completely human because of his physical differences. Mellor associates the monster with a racial threat as well, noting the way in which the rhetoric of the nineteenth century politicians in the British House of Commons "explicitly identified the slaves with Frankenstein's monster" (Mellor, *Mary Shelley* 113).

As Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, a series of slave rebellions and revolutions were rocking the foundations of the British Empire. Particularly significant was the Jamaican revolution of 1813. The enormous threat posed by what Britain perceived to be legions of non-white peoples insisting on independence parallels the monstrous threat posed by Victor's creation. Mellor notes in *Romanticism and Gender* that Shelley's "credo" (that passage in which Victor praises the supremacy of domesticity) "cast America in the role of a newborn-child-continent that should have been more carefully nurtured and developed by its European explorer-rulers" (77). Abolitionists and opponents of colonialism (like Shelley's own parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin) frequently viewed the British Empire as a parent who, having given birth to the colonies, needed to nurture them into adulthood. This attitude invariably fostered a certain paternalistic condescension toward non-European nations and peoples. This concern with the nurturing and development of offspring is mirrored in Shelley's concern with the education and socialization of the monster. There is something morally problematic and dangerous about bringing children into the world without appropriately socializing them. There is also something inherently problematic about viewing non-European people as children in need of the paternalistic guidance of their colonial parents. Thus, while Shelley's novel critiques in some sense the failings of the colonial system, it also reflects a biased view of other races that has the result of categorizing them as inferior to Europeans. Even though Shelley wrote a novel that is not ostensibly an allegory of slavery or colonialism, a subtext of racially charged issues emerges from her narrative. The Eurocentric geography of the novel represses the truth about the increasingly interdependent global economy of the nineteenth century.

Though Shelley's plot centers around Europe, the non-European countries populated by non-white peoples that were such a concern in the political arena of the day emerge in the text, if in subtle ways. From a Freudian perspective, one might say that the non-white world, which is repressed from the heroic action of the novel, resurfaces, demanding the reader's attention. For example, Walton's language of colonial exploration imagines:

...the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind...by discovering a passage...to those countries to reach which at present so many months are requisite (2).

In a certain sense, Walton imagines his project as redrawing geographic and national boundaries, bringing Europe closer to the objects of imperialism. After having traversed immense seas, Walton imagines reaching "the most southern cape of Africa or America," where many British colonies were founded (7). Victor commits a similar act of geographic imagination when he asserts that he "would have made a pilgrimage to the highest peak of the Andes" to avenge his family (74). The New World figures here as foreign and otherworldly, as a space of exotic violence and revenge. As Mellor notes, Henry Clerval's ambitious desire to join the East India Company and expend his energy in the pursuit of imperialist concerns forms a dangerous parallel to Victor's scientific endeavor (Mellor, *Mary Shelley* 113). Here, Mellor suggests that both men are attempting to penetrate mysterious foreign regions where they do not rightfully belong.

By far the most troubled display of racial content in the novel is displayed as anxiety about the monster's sexuality and procreative powers. Racial concerns are bound up in Shelley's novel with concerns about proper procreation. The "problem" of racial miscegenation arises in the text in the form of Victor Frankenstein's anxieties regarding the potential sexual activities of his monster. Victor envisions himself as the creator of a new racial group, saying, "a new species would bless me as its creator and source" (38). Victor creates a new species, which he discovers cannot be easily controlled.

H.L. Malchow notes that the physiognomy of the monster "suggests the standard description of the black man in both the literature of the West Indies and that of West African exploration" (5). The monster's yellow complexion thus recalls both the racially ambiguous "mulatto" and the Asian marauder of the yellow peril. Malchow touches upon the unusual yet racially ambiguous color of the monster's skin as

an indication that Shelley is creating not "a specifically Negro monster" but rather "the threatening 'other'" (Malchow 6). That the otherness of the monster has strong racial overtones seems like a plausible hypothesis, especially in light of Walton's misidentification of him as "a savage" at the beginning of the narrative (9). The monster reminds Victor that, though he is bound to his creator as his "natural lord and king," he can easily rebel against that authority (81). "Remember," the monster tells Victor, "thou hast made me more powerful than thyself" (81). Malchow also notes in his essay that when composing her novel Shelley had recently read the works of Bryan Edwards, which recount "the horrors of slave rebellions" (5). In this context, the monster becomes a figure for the rebellious slave colony, which, as it grows in size and strength, grows also in explosive revolutionary potential.

The primary threat presented by the monster is a sexual one. Victor must provide him "with a female...with whom [he] can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for [his] being" (124). A potential racial subtext becomes even more evident when the monster refers to himself as a slave saying, "Mine shall not be the submission of abject slavery" (124). The monster clearly presents himself as a slave on the verge of rebelling if his sexual demands are not met. Victor sees the monster's request not as a longing for domestic ties or a tranquil existence, but as a sexual and hence racial threat to the entire world. After agreeing to meet the monster's demand, Victor imagines the potential consequences should the monster and his mate reproduce:

Even if they were to leave Europe and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the demon 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. Had I right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? I had before been moved by the sophisms of the being I had created; I had been struck senseless of his fiendish threats; but now, for the first time, the wickedness of my promise burst upon me; I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me 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 (144-5).

The monster's sexual demand, Victor fears, has the potential to create "a race of devils" inhabiting "the New World"

(144). The New World is already a racially charged space, and the fact that Shelley invokes it here as the breeding ground for the monstrous creature (who can also be read as a racialized type) moves the question from the realm of the monstrous and inhuman into the nineteenth-century debate on the abolition of New World slavery and the future of imperialism. Victor's ultimate fear in this passage is not that the monster will once again unleash his violent impulses on humanity, but that the imaginary safety and stability of the white, Eurocentric world he inhabits might be compromised by the reproduction of two racially "other" individuals. The legacy of New World slavery is like a repressed monster that must inevitably surface in Shelley's novel, revealing the sexual anxieties that underpin the racial discourse of her day. Ultimately, Frankenstein's monster threatens not just his immediate family and friends, but the entire white, European world.

Conclusion

Though this sexualized, racial fear and paternalistic, Eurocentric view of non-white races is a distinct subtext of Shelley's work, *Frankenstein* is also undeniably a critique of Romanticism, colonialism and imperialism as potentially destructive, even deadly, paradigms. Like the Romantic poetic project, the colonial project is fraught with tensions, anxieties and danger. The threats posed by the unbridled ambition of Frankenstein's scientific pursuits, Walton's explorations, and Clerval's imperial aims share one important quality — they are all failed male projects, which in their exclusion of the female threaten more than just the "tranquility of domestic affections" (40). Their self-destructive insistence upon the mutual exclusivity of the domestic, feminine space and the masculine, extrafamilial outside world threatens the masculine space as much as the feminine. Victor's creation threatens the human race with extinction, Walton's exploration nearly kills his entire crew, and Clerval's imperialism threatens to destroy the British Empire itself. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley gives us women who are the helpless charges and pretty playthings of their husbands, homosocial relationships which reproduce feminine care-taking and intimacy yet fail to regulate egotistical male ambitions, and sexuality which is capable of producing only death or potential racial annihilation.

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