

Mary Shelley: Teaching and Learning through *Frankenstein*

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Abstract

In the writing of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley was able to change the course of women's learning, forever. Her life started from an elite standpoint as the child of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. As such, she was destined to grow to be a major influence in the world. Mary Shelley's formative years were spent with her father and his many learned friends. Her adult years were spent with her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and their literary friends. It was on the occasion of the Shelleys' visit to Lord Byron at his summer home that Mary Shelley was to begin her novel which changed the course of women's ideas about safety and the home. No longer were women to view staying in the home as a means to staying safe and secure. While women always knew that men could be unreliable, Mary Shelley openly acknowledged that fact and provided a forum from which it could be discussed. Furthermore, women learned that they were vulnerable and that, in order to insure their own safety, they could not entirely depend upon men to rescue them; in fact, in some cases, women needed to save themselves from the men in their lives, often with no one to turn to except themselves and other women. There are many instances where this is shown throughout *Frankenstein*, such as: Justine's prosecution and execution and Elizabeth's murder. Mary Shelley educated women in the most fundamental of ways and continues to do so through every reading of *Frankenstein*.

Frankenstein

In April of 1815, the volcano Tambora, in Indonesia, erupted. It was the largest eruption in recorded history. The year before two other large volcanoes had erupted. Coupled with the Tambora eruption, this produced enough volcanic ash to sufficiently blot out the sun and give the world a year without a summer. It was that summer, in 1816, that Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, one of the most influential books of all time. To understand the novel, its rooting in Mary Shelley's formative years, and its impact, it is necessary to understand a little of Mary Shelley's background.

Mary Shelley was born to Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, who were renowned anarchists and Jacobean radicals of their time. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote one of the most influential books on women's rights, *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Unfortunately Mary (to clarify, I will use Mary to designate Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley since Shelley is used almost exclusively for Percy Bysshe Shelley and in order to forestall confusion of the two) was never to know her mother, since Mary Wollstonecraft died when Mary was only ten days old. Her father, William Godwin, the notable philosophical anarchist and novelist, was not able to handle the responsibilities in raising a baby, and soon married a woman with two

daughters. Mary never received her father's emotional support, but was able to flourish under his educational support. Godwin was sought out by a wide variety of notable authors of the time which included: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt and Percy Bysshe Shelley. On many occasions, Mary, after being sent to bed by her step-mother, was able to sneak back into the room to hear the authors and philosophers expound on their works and debate many current issues. On one occasion she was able to hear Coleridge recite his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* just before it was published. It was under her father's tutelage and encouragement that Mary was able to grow intellectually and creatively at a time when women were not afforded an education other than what could be considered proper disciplines for young ladies: i.e. Needlework of all kinds, music, art, fine penmanship, and reading (mainly of novels {like Fielding's Pamela}, diaries, poetry and travelogues). Mary caught the eye of Percy Bysshe Shelley when she was 16 years old, and when she was 17 they eloped to the European continent because Shelley was already married in England.

The Shelleys traveled across the continent and made many friends in the literary world. One dear friend was Lord Byron, who became enamored with Mary's step-sister Jane (who called herself Claire). During the summer of 1816, the year without a summer, the Shelleys, Lord Byron, Mary's step-sister, Claire, as well as several other unnamed guests, stayed at Lake Geneva in Switzerland. What was to be a happy, carefree summer ended up as a dreary, cold, dismal time with no one able to enjoy the lake or its environs. According to several sources, the year was so bad, weather-wise, that crops failed around the world. Grapes in the Champagne region of France were frozen on the vine. The Swiss government issued pamphlets explaining which plants were edible and which were poisonous. The Swiss people suffered from such famine that they were reduced to eating moss. This was the climate in which the Shelley party found themselves; although, as members of the upper class, they did not suffer as much from the famine. It was during a particularly bleak time that, some say, Lord Byron proposed that each guest write a ghost story. The common belief is that Mary Shelley was the only one to complete her story. However, there is evidence that other stories were written and published from that summer at Lord Byron's estate. One such work was written by John Polidori: *The Vampyre*, from which Bram Stoker gained his inspiration to write *Dracula*.

Mary Shelley, well aware of her mother's most famous work, was able to put together a novel which sent terror into many hearts because of the subtly placed messages within the book.

Her awareness of her mother's stand on women's rights influenced how Mary was to write the story as a cautionary tale for women. Whether or not Mary was completely aware of these messages of caution and how they played out in her novel, they are still present and the readers are influenced in some subtle, and other not so subtle, ways. The chief message, of course, was not to play God and tinker with creation. The other messages contained within the pages were equally, and at times, more important to the general readership. One important theme reflects the rights of women in that the main female character, Elizabeth, is only accorded secondary status and is a direct reflection of how Frankenstein views her place in his world. This is a major point which will be discussed at more length later in the paper. Other messages, meant for women readers, include the message that learning in isolation (as was the chief means of women's education during that time period) is very dangerous to society, as well as the individual. Another point is that women should learn to be more independent and should not rely totally on men for their security, emotional, and financial stability. Other points include the fact that most novels written at the time were of the Romantic era and glorified God, nature and the individual. Even Jane Austen, in her satirizing of the upper class, utilized those same tenets. Virtually every story ended happily. Mary Shelley changed everything with the writing of the first successful Gothic novel.

As a Gothic novel, *Frankenstein* goes against the signifiers of the Romantic Era. Romanticism valued God, nature, the individual, the emotions and the exotic. Gothic dwelt only on the exotic and the emotions, and then only the emotions of horror, fear, and depression. The individual was not important, except when imparting emotion. Along this line, it is very significant that the story is written in the epistolary mode by Victor Frankenstein, as he tells his story to Captain Robert Walton (who relates Victor's story to his sister through the letters), because it brings the story that much closer to the reader, as if it is being told directly to them; the reader is in on the secret along with Captain Walton. One further note on the narration is that the relating of the story becomes multi-layered when Frankenstein tells Walton, who records it in letters to his sister, to which the reader becomes privy, and as a further layer, the creature relates his story to Victor and then continues down the chain. The fact that Walton tells the story to his *sister* is of utmost importance in that women are being taught the significance of formal education versus self-education. This is further played out when it is learned that the creature is extremely articulate, but self-taught and, therefore, cannot be good. Also, it relates the story

purely from Victor Frankenstein's perspective and, therefore, allows him to censor himself and give the reader only what he wants the reader to know. It is one reason why the book cannot be classified as pure science fiction. There is no science in it. Frankenstein cleverly tells Walton that he will not tell how he was able to achieve his creation because he does not want anyone to make the same mistake as he made. In doing this, Mary Shelley eliminates the need to go into intricate scientific data, which she doesn't know well enough to fake, and also serves to make the creation much more mysterious and miraculous. The reader is also made to realize just how tormented and remorseful Frankenstein is about what he has created. It does not, however, excuse his behavior throughout the story which directly leads to murder and general mayhem.

To begin, the story with Captain Walton relating how he happened to be stuck in the ice near the Arctic draws the reader into the remoteness of the area, especially in the early 1800s. Walton takes three letters to his sister, Mrs. Saville of London, to detail how isolated he and his crew are. He mentions that his ship is several hundred miles from any land. After seeing a lone person with a dog sled approximately a half mile from the ship, Walton and the crew recognize that the person "had the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic stature".¹ A few hours later, the crew is shocked to find another man alive on the ice. The man, later identified as Victor Frankenstein, refuses to come aboard the ship until he learns that the destination of the ship is the North Pole. Once aboard, Walton nurses Frankenstein back to health and is rewarded by hearing Frankenstein's tale of misery, self-blame and horror. To reach the beginning of Victor's story, the reader is led through a series of six letters to Walton's sister. This lengthy build-up is necessary in order to understand the isolation of Walton, his ship, and Frankenstein's desperation in following his creature to the ends of the Earth.

Frankenstein begins to relate his story through background information that seems vital to understanding how he got to the point of traversing the arctic ice, alone, by dog sled. He relates the circumstances surrounding the marriage of his parents and how his father sought to "shelter [his wife—Victor's mother], as a fair exotic is sheltered by the gardener".² Mary calls on the images of the Romantic Era to draw in the reader to a tale of supposed love and tranquility. Victor relates how he was esteemed by his parents and goes so far to speak of what they apparently owed him.

¹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus* ed. Maurice Hindle. (New York: Penguin 1985), 73.

² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 82.

I was their plaything and their idol, and something better—their child, the innocent and helpless creature bestowed on them by heaven, whom to bring up to good, and whose future lot it was in their hands to direct to happiness or misery, according as they fulfilled their duties towards me. With this deep consciousness of what they owed towards the being to which they had given life, added to the active spirit of tenderness that animated both, it may be imagined that while during every hour of my infant life I received a lesson of patience, of charity, and of self-control. I was so guided by a silken cord that all seemed but one train of enjoyment to me.³

This is very special and tender treatment given to Victor, and which he too quickly forgets when he gives life to another. Frankenstein, however, continues to give his own background and how Elizabeth comes into the lives of the Frankensteins. She was found among a group of children of a peasant woman. The woman relates how Elizabeth was left with them because her mother had died and the family was in want of a wet nurse (this is a reflection of Mary Shelley's own life). Unfortunately, Elizabeth's father died in an Austrian dungeon and his child became an orphan. Mrs. Frankenstein, with her husband's permission, decided to take in the orphan girl. Victor describes her coming to live with them as a blessing, but continues to describe Elizabeth in specific terms, as an object, as to how she relates directly to him as "my more than sister—the beautiful and adored companion of all my occupations and my pleasures".⁴ He even says that his mother joked that she had "a pretty present for my Victor"⁵, and, thus, Elizabeth became his and, he foreshadows, that until "death she was to be mine only".⁶ Elizabeth was merely an object, a gift, and never seen as an independent person. He continues with their upbringing and the subsequent birth of two younger brothers, but fails to mention their names or when the youngest was born and their age difference.

Instead, Victor Frankenstein relates his early education as self-taught and problematic. "I was, to a degree, self-taught...and I was left to struggle with a child's blindness, added to a student's thirst for knowledge".⁷ He continues to relate how he made discoveries on his own and read many pseudo-scientists who were later dismissed by professors who denigrated their teachings. Again, this shows how self-education can be insidious. In the midst of his ramblings, Victor returns again and again to mention Elizabeth, and how she was an angel to all and the

³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 82.

⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 84.

⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 84.

⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 84.

⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 88.

comfort of the family when Mrs. Frankenstein died after contracting scarlet fever after nursing Elizabeth during her bout with scarlet fever.

After nearly 100 pages, Victor finally leaves for his first formal education at Ingolstadt which was delayed by the death of his mother. Upon arriving at the university, Victor visits several professors who ask him about his education up to that point. When he tells them about the principle authors whom he has read, one professor, M. Krempe, stares at him and replies, “have you really spent your time in studying such nonsense?”⁸ He continues by berating Victor with the following statement:

Every minute, every instant that you have wasted on those books is utterly and entirely lost. You have burdened your memory with exploded systems and useless names. Good God! In what desert land have you lived, where no one was kind enough to inform you that these fancies which you have so greedily imbibed are a thousand years old and as musty as they are ancient?...My dear sir, you must begin your studies entirely anew.⁹

These statements clearly show the awakening of 19th century scientific thought through the refutation of supposed masters. Professor M. Waldman became his mentor after the terrible blow to his ego by M. Krempe. Waldman encouraged Victor to surpass the past masters. He became impressed by Victor’s work ethic and willingness to apply himself to chemistry. He states that he believes Victor capable of wondrous things, but warns him that if he wishes to become a great man of science, he needs to apply himself to all to the other branches of science as well.¹⁰ Waldman directs Frankenstein’s learning by assigning the correct books for him to study. He also promises Victor that he will have the use of all of the laboratory equipment when he knows enough so that he will not misuse it.¹¹ It is through his formal education at the university that Victor makes great strides and even gains the esteem and admiration of the whole of the university population—professors and students alike. Victor relates to Walton that in some studies “you go as far as others have gone before you, and there is nothing more to know; but in a scientific pursuit there is continual food for discovery and wonder”.¹² After his introduction to the study of anatomy, Victor becomes obsessed with the study of natural decay upon the body and tells Walton that, when he combines that knowledge with his observations of electricity in

⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 94.

⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 94.

¹⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 97.

¹¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 97.

¹² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 98.

thunderstorms, he learns the secret to bestowing life on inanimate tissue.¹³ This is also the point in the story where Mary Shelley, through her narrator, informs the readers that they will not learn the secret that Victor knows. Victor does not want the reader to fall into the same error that became his downfall. In other words, he found the secret through formal study and if we want to do the same, we need to attend a university, apply ourselves to all areas of endeavor, and we, too, may learn the secrets of bestowing life. If the readers want to try it on their own, they will fail.

Victor continues his lecture on the hazards of studying in isolation when he relates how his father chided him for ignoring his family. His father says that Victor's lack of response to his family is "proof that [his] other duties are equally neglected".¹⁴ Because Victor is relating this after the fact, he has a different perspective on what he accomplished. He tells Walton how wrong it is to study in isolation:

If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule were always observed: if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved, Caesar would have spared his country, America would have been discovered more gradually, and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed.¹⁵

Men, acting on their own or in their own interests, can have devastating effects on civilizations and world peace for generations. Had they only taken the time to pursue family interests and been at peace, internally, civilizations would not have fallen and the world would be an entirely different place. Unfortunately, Victor Frankenstein says that this rarely happens with men of intellect and ambition, and he had both.

In the beginning, Victor speaks of the dedication of his parents to their responsibility of raising their children and how devoted they were. He also mentions how much he loved them for it. Now, in chapter 5, Victor (as the voice of Mary Shelley) talks about finishing his experiment and how his creation became imbued with life. He has never given any thought to the possibility that he might actually succeed and re-animate lifeless tissue. He speaks of the "breathless horror and disgust"¹⁶ which filled his heart and he runs away from that which he created, giving no thought whatsoever of his responsibility to his creature or the society on which it is unleashed,

¹³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 98.

¹⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 103.

¹⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 103.

¹⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 105.

but only his own horror, fear and loathing of that which he has created. Throughout the ages, men, upon viewing their new born children, are disgusted by the blood and gore that accompanies childbirth. Some men never completely recover from that trauma and leave all parenting to their wives. In like manner, Victor wanders all night and does not return to his lodging for fear that the creature is still there. It is only when he happens upon his friend, Henry Clerval, who has come to visit him, that Victor is forced to return to his apartments. His relief is palpable when he realizes that the creature is not there, so much so that he does not even care where it went or what happened to it. His connection with Clerval helps Victor to reconnect with his family and enables him to emotionally connect to his father, his brothers and to Elizabeth. It is the emotional connection that affords him the ability to appear to be calm and serene. However, it is an act and Clerval becomes very concerned with Victor and his state of mind when, upon realizing that the creature is not in the apartment, Victor becomes wild-eyed and laughs a “loud, unrestrained, heartless laughter”.¹⁷ He then relates to Walton that this was the start of a “nervous fever”¹⁸ which forced him into confinement for several months. Clerval was his only companion during this time and nursed him back to health.

When Victor is almost completely recovered, Clerval gives him a letter from Elizabeth which he had been saving until Victor was well enough to read it. This letter is important in that it sets up the events which are to follow and which play such a significant part of Victor’s blame in the deaths of Justine (the serving girl), William (his youngest brother), and Elizabeth. In the letter, Elizabeth refreshes Victor’s memory (and informs the reader) that Justine “was a great favorite of yours”,¹⁹ and informs him how she returned home to care for her dying mother, and who only served to torment Justine and accuse Justine as the cause of the deaths of her brothers and sister. The old woman would vacillate between attacking Justine and begging her forgiveness. Justine was perceived as independent, while the old woman was isolated; neither was a condition that men would interpret as a good thing. Therefore, Justine was punished by her mother for isolating her and for becoming independent of her family. When the old woman dies, Justine returns to the Frankensteins and Elizabeth “assures [him] that I love her tenderly. She is very clever and gentle and extremely pretty”.²⁰ Only the characteristics which men would find

¹⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 109.

¹⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 109.

¹⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 113.

²⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 114.

attractive are emphasized: her gentleness and her beauty. Elizabeth also talks about William, Victor's youngest brother and, interestingly, whom the reader has never heard mentioned before. The reader learns that William is about five or six years old; is a beautiful, sweet child with excellent health. She then encourages Victor to write, even a short note, so that the family will be hopeful of his recovery.

After responding to Elizabeth's letter, Victor and Clerval take a short holiday in the mountains. Upon their return, Victor speaks of the peasants they meet and how everyone seems so joyful and it seems to infect him; his "own spirits were high, and [he] bounded along with feelings of unbridled joy and hilarity".²¹ Victor's joy was not to last. When they (Victor and Clerval) returned to their rooms, Victor received a letter from his father who must impart some dreadful news. "William is dead!...he is murdered!"²² When Victor returns to Geneva, it is already late and the gates to the city are already shut, so he resolves to visit the spot where William was murdered. Only much later, when the creature relates his story, is it revealed that the creature plants the valuable pin in Justine's pocket, which becomes the chief means of proving her guilt. She was in isolation, trying to look for the boy, and was locked out of the town gates. She had to pass the night by herself in a barn and was, thus, vulnerable to the evil trick played on her by the creature. As Victor says a prayer at the exact spot of William's murder, he thinks he sees a person of "gigantic stature"²³ and immediately recognizes the figure as his creation, knowing that he is the murdered of William. When he finally arrives at their home, he discusses the situation with his brother, Ernest, who informs him that Elizabeth, who previously blamed herself for William's death by allowing him to wear an expensive pin, is even more wretched "since the murderer has been discovered".²⁴ Victor immediately believes that they have discovered his creation and will, now, blame him for William's murder. He is actually relieved, to a degree, to find out that Justine is the accused. He knows she did not commit the murder and is convinced that she will never be found guilty. Elizabeth then entreats him to "find some means to justify my poor guiltless Justine".²⁵ Victor does assure Elizabeth that "'She is innocent, my Elizabeth,...and that shall be proved; fear nothing, but let your spirits be cheered by the

²¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 118.

²² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 119.

²³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 123.

²⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 125.

²⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 127.

assurance of her acquittal”²⁶. However, Victor never says a word in her defense. He believes that any words by him would be viewed as the “ravings of a madman”²⁷ since he cannot prove he made such a creature and he was not present at the time when William was murdered. When Justine is found guilty, Victor “rushe[s] out of the court in agony”,²⁸ but he, again, never says a word in her defense. Victor shows that women cannot entirely rely on men for their salvation and cannot be relied upon to take responsibility for their actions. Therefore, he becomes guilty of the murder of William and of Justine by proxy. Women and children cannot count on Victor to shoulder his responsibility and, thus, Justine was executed for a murder she did not commit. The day before her execution, Elizabeth and Victor visit Justine, and Elizabeth swears to fight the conviction and to melt the hearts of the judges so that they see the truth. Justine consoles her and tells her that she can accept her fate and that Elizabeth should “Learn from me, dear lady, to submit in patience to the will of heaven!”²⁹ and, still, Victor says nothing.

Instead of speaking out, Victor feels remorse until he rationalizes that he did nothing wrong; it was the creature who committed these depraved acts, and he decides that he is justified in his anger and desire to kill what he had made. At the same time, Elizabeth becomes despondent and, when Victor says that they rely on her to lift the mood of their father and of the entire household, she replies, in part, that her view of the world has changed since the “miserable death of Justine Moritz”³⁰ and that “men appear to me as monsters thirsting for each other’s blood”³¹ as they act on their own interests. This is a foreshadowing of the events which will lead to her own murder.

At this point of the story, Mary Shelley gives the reader an interlude of a Romantic nature. This serves two purposes. One purpose is that it shows that, while Victor expounds on his agony over the events which have taken place, he does not stay to comfort those who are most affected: his family. Instead, he takes the time to leave and to go wandering in the mountains amid the beauty of nature. He remarks that,

the weight upon my spirit was sensibly lightened as I plunged yet deeper in the ravine of Arve. The immense mountains and precipices that overhung me on every side, the sound of the river raging among the rocks, and the dashing of the

²⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 127.

²⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 128.

²⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 131.

²⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 134.

³⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 138.

³¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 138.

waterfalls around, spoke of a power mighty as Omnipotence—and I ceased to fear or to bend before any being less almighty than that which had created and ruled the elements, here displayed in their most terrific guise...But [the beauty] was augmented and rendered sublime by the mighty Alps.³²

It is a sharp contrast to the horror of the events from which Victor is running and from which none of the others can escape. He remarks on the Natural Beauty, which is God-given which is in sharp contrast to Unnatural Ugliness, which is man-made.

This, also, shows the selfish nature of Victor and how only his comfort matters. Likewise, it reminds the reader of Romantic literature and the blissful, happy stories where no one is ever permanently hurt and the stories end happily. The reader is almost lulled into believing that this story could still have a happy ending.

Mary Shelley begins Chapter Ten along the same lines. Victor is awed by the beauty of the mountains and even states that the mountains “bade”³³ him to be at peace. That peace is short-lived because Victor’s creature finds him in the mountains and asks Victor to hear him out before Victor gives vent to his hatred for his creation. The creature shows more compassion for Victor than Victor does for his creation. However, the creature (who is never even given a name) chastises Victor and reminds him of his duty.

You, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us. You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind. If you will comply with my conditions, I will leave them and you at peace; but if you refuse, I will glut the maw of death, until it be satiated with the blood of your remaining friends.³⁴

Victor agrees to hear him out and they travel to a cabin where the creature relates everything that happened to him after he was imbued with life. His recitation on how he found himself alone, without a means to articulate his wants and needs, without friends, without food or clothing sufficient to protect him from the cold, and how miserable he found himself to be, and how he finally just sat down and wept because he knew nothing, is a means for the reader to acquire feelings for the creature and to understand the cruelty of Victor in leaving the creature to fend for himself while knowing nothing.

The recitation is quite lengthy and is striking in how articulate the creature has become. He relates how he grew and learned to express himself, feed himself, read, write, love and hate.

³² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 140.

³³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 142.

³⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 145.

He is not a mindless killing machine. He is not the creature of the Hollywood movies who is portrayed by Boris Karloff. That creature kills by accident, but is still deemed a menace to be hunted down and killed. Mary Shelley's creature does not intend to kill, at first. When he first happens upon William, he even tells him, "I do not intend to hurt you; listen to me".³⁵ It is only when William reveals that he is a Frankenstein that the creature tells him, "You belong to my enemy—to him towards whom I have sworn eternal revenge; you shall be my first victim".³⁶ He also reveals how he gave Justine the pin which proved to convict her of William's murder. Victor now knew for certain what he, before, had surmised.

At the end of his story, the creature tells Victor the only thing that he wants from Victor, and that he will leave humanity to itself, if Victor will grant his request. He wants Victor to create a companion for him, a mate. He demands it as a right as the creation of Victor. He says that Victor owes it to him and Victor cannot refuse. This is reminiscent of the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis. It is when God says that it is not good for man to be alone that He makes woman and the woman becomes the means to man's downfall. Victor does refuse because of his belief that women can be the root of men's problems, and they wrangle back and forth for a while until the creature says: "What I ask of you is reasonable and moderate; I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself: the gratification is small, but it is all that I can receive, and it shall content me".³⁷ Victor considers his request and the creature gives Victor further incentive by stating: "My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment".³⁸ He promises that he and his companion will go to the wilderness in South America and that no one will ever hear from them again. South America signifies the New World where the New Man and New Woman can live out their lives in their Garden of Eden. Victor argues against it saying that the creature will then have a companion to aid him in his destruction of humanity. The creature assures Victor that all hate and vengeance will have fled from him and that he would eventually die, at peace, without cursing his maker. Victor finally relents and says he will do what the creature asks if the creature will swear a solemn oath to which the creature readily agrees.

³⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 187.

³⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 187.

³⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 191.

³⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 191.

Upon his return to his home, Victor puts off his promise, day after day, week after week. His father finally talks to him about Elizabeth and how their marriage would make him very happy. Victor agrees, but decides that he should take a journey before embarking on his marriage to Elizabeth. This echoes the popular non-fiction of the time in that young men, of breeding, often went on a tour before settling down and, upon their return, wrote up their adventures and women avidly read these books because they would never be allowed similar adventures. However, he lets the reader, through Walton, know that his real reason for the journey to England is to fulfill his promise to the creature. By the time the reader gets through reading the travelogue through Germany and England, to the environs of Edinburgh in Scotland, the reader is once again lulled into believing that Victor will finally fulfill his promise, the creature will depart with his mate—forever, and Victor and Elizabeth will finally marry and live happily ever after. This is not to be.

Victor exiles himself to a barren island which only had three huts on the entire land area, and it is here that Victor retreats to fulfill his promise to his creature. He talks about how he has such mixed feelings concerning his work. He vacillates between eager hope and obscure foreboding of evil.³⁹ As he nears completion of the female, he happens to look out of the window and sees the creature watching him. He reads into the creature's expression something that seems a bit contrived. Victor says:

I saw by the light of the moon the daemon at the casement. A ghastly grin wrinkled his lips as he gazed on me, where I sat fulfilling the task which he had allotted to me...As I looked on him, his countenance expressed the utmost extent of malice and treachery. I though with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged. The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended for happiness, and with a howl of devilish despair and revenge, withdrew.⁴⁰

Victor does not seem to recognize that his creature is only evil because of his actions toward the creature. If he is evil, it is because Victor never shouldered his responsibility. If the creature is devilish in his despair and threatens revenge, it is only because Victor denies him of the one thing that can make him happy and the one thing that Victor prizes above all other gifts—a woman of his own. Victor has claimed Elizabeth as his prize, his gift, his and his alone, since he was a young boy. The creature is asking of his creator nothing less and Victor, within moments of fulfilling his promise, destroys the female right in front of the creature. He should expect

³⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 209.

⁴⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 211.

nothing less than total and complete revenge, but he seems surprised that the creature vows revenge. He does not seem to understand the nature of the revenge, even when the creature tells him, “I go; but remember, I shall be with you on your wedding-night”.⁴¹ The creature has a few more things in store for Victor before he fulfills his promise.

On leaving the island, Victor finds the sailing difficult and by the time he reaches shore, he is confused and unsure of where he has landed. The townspeople take this as a sign that Victor is the murderer of a stranger to their shores. The magistrate insists that Victor is shown the body of the victim. Victor gazes on the body of his dear friend Henry Clerval and falls into a nervous fever that last for two months. When he finally awakens to his surroundings, the magistrate informs Victor that he has a visitor. Victor assumes it is the creature and says, “Oh! Take him away!”⁴² which the magistrate takes as a sign of Victor’s guilt in the murder of Clerval. It is only when Victor is told that the visitor is his father does he seem excited and pleased that his father was there. His father obtains his release, but tells Victor that he must come home and marry Elizabeth as soon as possible. During the voyage home, the two have a long time to converse and share what has transpired. Victor still hides the truth from his father about his creature, but tells his father of Justine’s innocence. It is a strange declaration from the reader’s standpoint, since the reader knows that Victor is guilty of Justine’s death, William’s death and Clerval’s death, as surely as if he had strangled them himself. Of Justine he says, “Justine, poor unhappy Justine, was as innocent as I, and she suffered the same charge; she died for it; and I am the cause of this—I murdered her. William, Justine, and Henry—they all died by my hands”.⁴³ However, whenever his father pressed him for an explanation, Victor “avoided explanation and maintained a continual silence concerning the wretch I had created”,⁴⁴ not because he feared retribution or that people would loathe him, but because he feared that people would call him mad.

Victor writes a letter to respond to one from Elizabeth. He has some foreboding about his marriage to Elizabeth and assumes that the creature is going to kill him on his wedding night. In spite of that he assures Elizabeth that they will marry soon after he arrives home. He decides that he wants to confess all to Elizabeth so he tells her that “I will confide this tale of misery and

⁴¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 213.

⁴² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 224.

⁴³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 229.

⁴⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 230.

terror to you the day after our marriage shall take place, for, my sweet cousin, there must be perfect confidence between us. But until then, I conjure you, do not mention or allude to it".⁴⁵ He does not even give her the chance to reject him first. He won't tell her until the day after they are married when he knows that the creature has promised to be with him on his wedding night. Victor believes that he won't have to tell Elizabeth because, by the day after the wedding, he thinks he will be dead; a truly cowardly way out of the dilemma.

Elizabeth spends the period before the wedding trying to boost Victor's spirits and the wedding day is beautiful and Elizabeth comforts Victor again by saying,

Be happy, my dear Victor...; there is, I hope, nothing to distress you; and be assured that if a lively joy is not painted in my face, my heart is contented. Something whispers to me not to depend too much on the prospect that is opened before us, but I will not listen to such a sinister voice...What a divine day! How happy and serene all nature appears!⁴⁶

Elizabeth has foreshadowed that all will not be well, but she tries to inject the Romantic feelings that nature is serene and the day given by God. If that is the case then they must be happy and they will always be happy. If the book had ended at that moment, it would have been a novel worthy of Jane Austen and the Romantic poets. If it had ended with the death of Victor Frankenstein, the reader would have been able to say, "oh well, he got what he deserved." It does not end at that moment or in that manner. Instead, Mary Shelley insists that Victor remain ever vigil to the possibility of the creature coming after him. To that end, Victor carries a pistol close to his breast in order to be ready. He lets Elizabeth retire to their room and he continues to pace and fret when he hears "a shrill and dreadful scream. It came from the room into which Elizabeth had retired".⁴⁷ When Victor rushes into the room, Elizabeth is dead and lying in a position which is reminiscent of Fuseli's Romantic painting of "The Nightmare."

She was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair. Every where I turn I see the same figure—her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier. Could I behold this and live? Alas! Life is obstinate and clings closest where it is most hated. For a moment only did I lose recollection: I fell senseless on the ground.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 233.

⁴⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 236.

⁴⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 230.

⁴⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 239.

The creature looks in the window and points toward Elizabeth and seems to jeer. Victor faints and upon recovering himself he reflects on the deaths the creature has caused and concludes that no one that he cares about is safe. Therefore, he rushes home to make sure they are safe.

Victor does not seem overly emotional in either direction from losing Elizabeth to finding his father and brother still alive. Instead he seems more concerned that

Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change. The sun might shine or the clouds might lower; but nothing could appear to me as it had done the day before. A fiend had snatched from me every hope of future happiness; no creature had ever been so miserable as I was; so frightful an event is single in the history of man.⁴⁹

Victor is all about Victor, but does seem to have some compassion when he tells his father of Elizabeth's death. The old man is inconsolable and dies in Victor's arms a few days later.

Frankenstein is now rushing his story to Walton and tells how he has pursued the creature to the ends of the Earth, but now he is dying and the creature will have his final revenge. In the midst of this narration, Victor is still able to find some joy in the world. He says how his life is hateful to him, but he is able to find joy in sleep.

...it was during sleep alone that I could taste joy. O blessed sleep! Often, when most miserable, I sank to repose, and my dreams lulled me even to rapture. The spirits that guarded me had provided these moments, or rather hours, of happiness that I might retain strength to fulfill my pilgrimage.⁵⁰

He is so driven by vengeance that he has lost sight of the fact that he is solely responsible for the carnage the creature leaves in his wake. He vows vengeance but has no way to fulfill it. He wants to torture his creature to death and fails to realize that by creating him, abandoning him, and shunning him, he and he alone has tortured his creation for his entire life. To top that off, he denied him a companion. It is only on his deathbed that Victor finally acknowledges that he had a responsibility toward his creation, but then he still qualifies it saying that his duty was more toward the "beings of my own species"⁵¹ and still calls the creature evil with "unparalleled malignity and selfishness".⁵²

When the creature confronts the lifeless body of Victor Frankenstein, he shows that he has more understanding of his plight than Victor ever did. The creature tells Walton that he suffered agonies and remorse and even felt pity for Frankenstein until Victor decided to marry

⁴⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 241.

⁵⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 247.

⁵¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 259.

⁵² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 259.

Elizabeth. Then, he says, he truly did become evil and filled with rage against Frankenstein for daring to aspire to the happiness that Victor forever denied his creation. He asks Walton, “Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me?...Even now my blood boils at the recollection of this injustice”.⁵³ The creature is not an evil monster; again and again, Victor Frankenstein is shown as the truly evil person who creates, abandons, abuses, and blames his creation. Mary Shelley has cautioned the reader to take responsibility for his/her actions and, more than that, has cautioned women to get out into the world, learn—not in isolation—and explore. Women should not rely on men to shelter and save them from all harm. Women would do well to shelter themselves and learn to protect themselves from unscrupulous people. It is through the ever new interpretations of *Frankenstein* on film that Mary Shelley’s legacy continues to instill fear, entertain, and teach new generations around the world to maintain their independence in spite of all obstacles.

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⁵³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 263.