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## *Frankenstein*, Feminism, and Literary Theory

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DIANE LONG HOEVELER

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*Cave ab homine unius libri*, as the Latin epigram warns us: “beware the author of one book.” *Frankenstein* has so overshadowed Mary Shelley’s other books in the popular imagination that many readers believe – erroneously – that she is a one-book author. While this is decidedly not the case, *Frankenstein* has figured more importantly in the development of feminist literary theory than perhaps any other novel, with the possible exception of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. This essay will discuss the major feminist literary interpretations of the novel, beginning with Ellen Moers’s landmark reading in *Literary Women*<sup>1</sup> and then move to the more recent approaches taken by critics engaged in post-colonial theory, cultural studies, queer theory, and disability studies. In the process we will explore the provocative claim made by Fred Botting, who noted, “*Frankenstein* is a product of criticism, not a work of literature.”<sup>2</sup>

Let us begin by describing briefly the three major strands in feminist literary criticism: American, French, and British. American feminist literary critics (represented best perhaps by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar) understand “women’s experiences” to be the basis of the differences in women’s writings. American feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s tended to discuss recurring patterns of themes (i.e., the valorization of the quotidian value of domestic life, human community and relationships) or imagery (i.e., houses, claustrophobia, food and eating disorders, insanity, fetishizing of clothing, body image, etc.) in works by women. Led by the pioneering work of Elaine Showalter, such critics also took pains to rediscover “lost” women writers and to demonstrate the continuities of a women’s literary tradition.

By contrast, French feminist critics of this period (i.e., Julia Kristéva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous, among others) were concerned with the way the masculine-dominated system of language produces meanings that tend to objectify or erase women’s voices. In such a linguistic situation, women can rebel either through the strategic use of silence or by using *l’écriture féminine*, a specifically feminine form of language that is based on female subjectivity

and the physiology and bodily instincts of women. French feminism identifies *l'écriture féminine* with the pleasures (*jouissance*) of living in and writing out of a female body in harmony with the voice and body of the mother. Such writing seeks to resist the patriarchal system by which man has sought to objectify and dominate the external world by reclaiming the voice of the mother and the prelinguistic potentiality of the unconscious.

British feminists (for example, Michele Barrett, Cora Kaplan, and Juliet Mitchell, among others) have criticized both the American and French approaches as essentialist, that is, for understanding "masculine" and "feminine" as essential categories rather than as qualities shaped by social class and economics. British feminists of the 1970s and 1980s maintained that no woman can write outside of the constraints and oppressions that dominate the social and economic systems she inhabits. Influenced by Marxian literary criticism, British feminists are concerned with the material conditions under which literature is produced, while at the same time viewing literature largely as a manifestation of the dominant cultural ideologies operating invisibly in the society. As we will see, all three schools of feminist criticism are well represented in the critical work on *Frankenstein*, the novel itself appropriated as a sort of template by feminist critics with diverse approaches.

### Feminist readings: the 1970s and 1980s

In her *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers first coined the term "female gothic" to define what she called a genre written by women, centering on a "young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine." Moers's emphasis on the heroine's body is significant, for it signals a new theme in feminist criticism, a reading of literature not as a purely cerebral activity, but as one based in the pleasures and pains of the body. Moers was one of the first critics to recognize that *Frankenstein* evolved out of Shelley's own tragic experience as a young, unwed mother of a baby who would live only a few weeks. For Moers, *Frankenstein* is a "birth myth" that reveals the "revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences." Mary Wollstonecraft, as her daughter well knew, was killed by puerperal fever, contracted when she was unable to expel the placenta after Mary Shelley's birth in 1797. Moers reads Shelley's novel as a sublimated afterbirth, in which the author expels her own guilt both for having caused her mother's death and for having failed to produce a healthy son and heir for Percy (as his legal wife Harriet had done three months earlier). For Moers, the novel's strength was to present the "abnormal, or monstrous, manifestations of the child-parent tie" and in so doing, "to transform the standard Romantic matter of incest, infanticide,

and patricide into a phantasmagoria of the nursery.”<sup>3</sup> Moers died shortly after the publication of her major work, but her approach was elaborated and sustained when, three years later, U. C. Knoepfelmacher as well as Gilbert and Gubar were making similar assessments of the novel’s focus on parenting – more often than not, inadequate parenting.

Knoepfelmacher’s own essay in his important collection, *The Endurance of “Frankenstein,”* explores Shelley’s conflicted and ambivalent relationship to both her parents, one dead and the other very much alive. Knoepfelmacher states: “*Frankenstein* resurrects and rearranges an adolescent’s conflicting emotions about her relation both to the dead mother she idealized and mourned and to the living, ‘sententious and authoritative’ father-philosopher she admired and deeply resented for his imperfect attempts at ‘moulding’ Mary Wollstonecraft’s two daughters.”<sup>4</sup> His psycho-biographical approach to the work widened its readership by aligning it with the psychomachias written by such canonical male romantic poets as Percy Shelley, William Blake, and even Samuel Taylor Coleridge. By seeing the novel as essentially a “war within the mind” of the central character, in this case Victor functioning as a stand-in for Mary Shelley herself, literary critics like Knoepfelmacher placed the work clearly within a recognizable Romantic framework.

In 1979, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar also published their groundbreaking study of nineteenth-century women writers, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Gilbert and Gubar interpret *Frankenstein* as a “Romantic ‘reading’ of *Paradise Lost*,” with Victor alternately playing the roles of Adam, Satan, and Eve. The first two roles had become fairly standard topics of discussion in the criticism of the novel, but the last role, “Victor-as-Eve,” was to assume a distinctly important function in the evolution of American feminist approaches to the work. Gilbert and Gubar’s theory about the anxieties that plague a woman writer informs their approach to *Frankenstein* as “a waking dream . . . a Romantic novel about – among other things – Romanticism, as well as a book about books and perhaps, too, about the writers of books.” With this approach, the specter of Mary Wollstonecraft – a woman plagued by her attempts to reconcile the needs of her mind with her body – begins to haunt their account: “For this orphaned literary heiress, highly charged connections between femaleness and literariness must have been established early, and established specifically in relation to the controversial figure of her dead mother.” Gilbert and Gubar coin the term “bibliogenesis” to capture their sense of Shelley’s “fantasy of sex and reading,” that she brought herself to birth not through a human mother, but through the reading and consumption of books which “functioned as her surrogate parents.” The chief contribution of Gilbert and Gubar, however, lies in their recognition that Victor’s role “is paradigmatic, like the falsely creative fallen angel,

of the female artist, whose anxiety about her own aesthetic activity is expressed in Mary Shelley's deferential introductory phrase about her 'hideous progeny,' with its plain implication that in her alienated attic workshop of filthy creation she has given birth to a deformed book, a literary abortion or miscarriage."<sup>5</sup> In Gilbert's and Gubar's work, we find both the pragmatic wisdom and the limitations of American feminist literary criticism, which often sidesteps a rigorous examination of the specific historical contexts in which the literature was written.

In the 1980s, the increasingly explicit discussion of bodily issues in the novel – one manifestation of the influence of French feminist theory – was counterbalanced by a more textually oriented approach to this highly allusive and literary novel. In her influential book, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, Mary Poovey locates the tension between sexuality and textuality within the novel. Poovey focuses on the conflict between proper, conduct-book femininity identity and improper female, original, Romantic self-assertion: "[T]he narrative strategy of *Frankenstein*, like the symbolic presentation of the monster, enables Shelley to express and efface herself at the same time and thus, at least partially, to satisfy her conflicting desires for self-assertion and social acceptance."<sup>6</sup> Poovey's analysis focuses on Shelley's ambivalent responses to the ideology of motherhood, as well as on her condemnation of masculine Romantic egotism, epitomized in her husband's naively idealistic – perhaps cavalier – attitude to marriage vows, family responsibility, and societal conventions.

As we have seen, feminist criticism has never been monolithic; not surprisingly, some feminist critics have been keenly influenced by the assumptions and strategies of post-structuralist criticism, especially deconstruction. For feminism, the appeal of deconstruction lies in its capacity to explode the foundational assumptions of patriarchy. Once the human subject is decentered and viewed as a social construction, gender itself can be viewed as an artificial construct, a play of signifiers. As adapted from the work of Jacques Derrida, deconstruction became a technique of reading that stressed not the unity and wholeness of a text, but instead its gaps, fissures, or breaks in structure. Deconstruction further empowered feminists who had already undertaken to denounce Western culture's crucial binary oppositions – culture/nature; male/female – and embrace the belief that there are no determinate bounds to a text or a gender.

The emphasis on textuality that we see in Poovey and later Barbara Johnson was clearly indebted not simply to deconstruction, but also to the theories of Michel Foucault, who defined some of the dominant strategies practiced by literary critics working in a post-structuralist mode. Foucault claims that power operates throughout society through the manipulation of

“discourse systems” that control how ideologies are disseminated. Feminists who have adapted Foucault’s theories have studied literary genres as species of “discourse systems” that control and dominate how women function in a society that prescribes how they appear and behave. Hence, feminists and critics working in cultural studies have been interested in *Frankenstein* as a particularly potent discourse system, a manifestation of conflicted ideologies, working sometimes in league with its society’s repressive attitudes towards women and sometimes arguing against society’s negative stereotypes about the proper roles of mothers, daughters, servants, and friends.

One of the first American critics to link feminism and deconstruction, Barbara Johnson adopts a self-conscious and self-reflexive literary approach to the novel by analyzing it as an autobiographical record of the “struggle for feminine authorship”: “*Frankenstein* can be read as the story of the experience of writing *Frankenstein*.” Most interesting in Johnson’s discussion, however, is her recognition of the novel as dominated by its “description of a primal scene of creation . . . where do babies come from? And where do stories come from? In both cases, the scene of creation is described, but the answer to these questions is still withheld.”<sup>7</sup> As we shall see shortly, these questions about *Frankenstein* would be developed in the 1990s by Peter Brooks and Fred Botting.

In addition to deconstruction and post-structuralist theories, feminist literary criticism has also had to wrestle with the legacy of Sigmund Freud, particularly with his theories of gender, of the development of sexuality, of object choice, of the parents’ role in gender formation, of repression and sublimation, and of the girl’s transition from maternal to paternal identifications. Feminists such as Juliet Mitchell, in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*,<sup>8</sup> have sought to rethink such Freudian concepts as “the Oedipus complex,” “penis envy,” and “infantile sexuality,” rather than merely reject them wholesale. In this influential study, Mitchell takes a shrewd look at “the ideology of the biological family,” a subject of endless interest to feminist readers of *Frankenstein*.

A variety of psychoanalytical approaches to the novel increasingly came to dominate the feminist criticism of the 1980s. Mary Jacobus’s 1982 article, “Is There a Woman in This Text,” offers one of the most influential observations made on the novel: “A curious thread in the plot focuses not on the image of the hostile father (Frankenstein/God) but on that of the dead mother who comes to symbolize to the monster his loveless state. Literally unmothered, he fantasizes acceptance by a series of women but founders in imagined rebuffs and ends in violence.”<sup>9</sup> By bringing into the forefront the need to recognize the importance of the representation of women within the absences, gaps, or fissures of a work, Jacobus situated women as a category of significance

within the deconstructive methodology. Her syncretic approach, feminist-deconstructive, informed by psychoanalysis, helped to make this among the most widely cited of all critical essays on *Frankenstein*. In the same year, Kate Ellis published "Monsters in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois Family," an article that explores the constraining and claustrophobic sex-roles in the novel. For Ellis, the work is an attack on the oppressiveness of domesticity and the doctrine of separate spheres (public vs. private) for men and women.

Devon Hodge, in her 1983 essay "*Frankenstein* and the Feminine Subversion of the Novel," adapts French feminist theoretical positions to explain the use of three male narrators in the text: "But perhaps in adopting a male voice, the woman writer is given the opportunity to intervene from within, to become an alien presence that undermines the stability of the male voice."<sup>10</sup> Hodge's use of the terms "lack" and "absence" reveals the influence of another towering figure in feminist psychoanalytic theory: the French analyst Jacques Lacan. Lacan revised Freud's basic positions by claiming that the true subject of psychoanalysis was language and the unconscious mind, not the ego and its relation to the body, as Freud had asserted. For Lacan, psychosexual development could be understood by charting the stages that human beings undergo as they learn to process language. Lacan saw the so-called symbolic realm of language as the realm of the law of the father, in which the "phallus" (the symbol of the father's power) was the "privileged signifier" for all discourse. Lacan further asserted that all discourse was driven by a "desire" for a lost and unachievable object, as if moving incessantly along a chain of unstable signifiers without any possibility of coming to any final point of meaning or fixed significance. For Lacan, this hole within the self was a "lack," an "absence," hence the heavy use of the term by feminist critics influenced by his theories about development.

Another influential Lacanian reading belongs to Peter Brooks, who claims that the creature's monstrosity is the result of his inability to enter the signifying chain and language and thereby to gain meaning as a transcendental signified. Brooks's "What is a Monster? (According to *Frankenstein*)" relies on Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage," during which individual subjectivity is formed when the child sees itself reflected in the mother's eyes. According to Brooks, the motherless creature can only find what he thinks is human identity through the acquisition of language and the mastery of texts in the De Lacey household. Such a narrative displays, then, the constructed nature of bodies, and, ultimately, of cultures. As he notes, whatever else the monster might be, it "may also be that which eludes gender definition."<sup>11</sup>

But Lacan's most famous student in Paris, the Bulgarian emigrée Julia Kristéva, countered his theory of patriarchal language with a prelinguistic,

pre-oedipal signifying process centered on the infant's complete immersion and oneness with the body of the mother. This so-called semiotic stage of the completely unified mother and child is typically repressed when we acquire patriarchal language and enter the realm of the "symbolic." But Kristéva believes that the semiotic can always break out in revolutionary ways – particularly in avant-garde poetry – as a "heterogeneous destructive causality" that assaults the stable "subject." This revolutionary assault undermines the rationality of phallic discourse and the power of the "law of the Father," the patriarchal system that keeps women in a marginal status. Since language acquisition, the body of the mother, and the assault on the father are all central themes in *Frankenstein*, we can see why her influence continues to figure importantly.

A recent example of Kristéva's influence in the work of British critic Marie Mulvey-Roberts (2000) makes the point nicely. For Kristéva, in order to become a separate and speaking subject apart from the mother, the individual must reject everything associated with the mother's body and see it as "unacceptable, unclean or anti-social."<sup>12</sup> But the mother's body, now called "the abject," can never be completely expelled from one's consciousness and instead always exists on the borders of one's identity – like a corpse or bodily waste: "the most sickening of wastes . . . a border that has encroached upon everything . . . It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, for which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us."<sup>13</sup> For Mulvey-Roberts, the creature represents the "spectre of the maternal body as well as Frankenstein's monstrous child." Hence, "the quest for the expelled abject and reunion with it are another form of catharsis for matricidal guilt; in Shelley, this quest converges with the Female Gothic quest for the missing mother and the Romantic quest for lost origins."<sup>14</sup> The abjected maternal also comes into focus in "Bearing Demons: *Frankenstein's* Circumvention of the Maternal," a crucial chapter in Margaret Homans's 1986 book *Bearing the Word*. For Homans, the novel "portrays the situation of women obliged to play the role of the literal in a culture that devalues it . . . [T]he novel is simultaneously about the death and obviation of the mother and about the son's quest for a substitute object of desire."<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps because of Kristéva's influence, a key episode for psychoanalytic critics has been Victor's dream of seeing the youthful Elizabeth walking in the street, only to watch her turn into his dead mother, worms crawling over her decaying flesh (*F* I iv 34–35). Such critics read the dream as the "moment of desire" in the novel, with its conflation of the sexualized Elizabeth ("desire") and the dead mother ("lack"). Victor's rejection of his creature has been seen as one manifestation of the child's sense of abandonment and betrayal by



the dead mother. He blames Elizabeth for spreading the disease that killed his mother, at the same time he blamed his younger brother and Justine for stealing his mother's affections from him, the first child and rightful love object of the mother. In creating the monster, Victor attempts to undo the death of his mother. The monster is, so to speak, the first run on an experiment that Victor intends to eventually undertake on his dead mother's corpse. To psychoanalytic critics, all of this points to Shelley's own inability to accept her mother's death, as well as her baby's. And all of this suggests that the writing of literature was, for Shelley as for so many others, one way of denying the power of death.

Another key scene in the text for feminist critics is the creation and then destruction of the female creature's body, the "mate" that Victor had promised the creature in return for their exile from humanity. The fact that Victor constructs the body and then, when contemplating the realities of sexuality, desire, and reproduction, rips that body apart, suggests that the female body is for Victor infinitely more threatening and "monstrous" than was the creature's male body. As Homans notes:

[T]he impossibility of Frankenstein giving [his creature] a female demon, an object of its own desire, aligns the demon with women, who are forbidden to have their own desires. But if the demon is really a feminine object of desire, why is it a he? I would suggest that this constitutes part of Shelley's exposure to the male romantic economy that would substitute for real and therefore powerful female others a being imagined on the model of the poet's own self. By making the demon masculine, Shelley suggests that romantic desire seeks to do away, not only with the mother, but also with all females so as to live finally in a world of mirrors that reflect a comforting illusion of the male self's independent wholeness.<sup>16</sup>

The theme of the masculine Romantic ego in love with only versions of itself writ large is a topic that Shelley would have encountered in her husband's early poem *Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude*. But Victor's inability to allow the female creature to live is, for feminist critics, more than narcissism; it is another instance of the misogyny and fear of female sexuality that Shelley exposes and condemns.

But even psychoanalytic critics continue to be informed by the pragmatic legacy of American feminist criticism, for there are many who focus on the novel's female presences, rather than female absences. William Veeder's *Mary Shelley & Frankenstein: The Fate of Androgyny* dissects Shelley's psyche in a more traditional Freudian manner to explore her female characters. For Veeder, "Mary Shelley's very sense of the weakness in herself and womanhood makes her defensive in *Frankenstein*."<sup>17</sup> By reading Shelley's personal

life back into the text, Veeder concludes that the motivating force in the work is a “negative Oedipus” compulsion, or the need to destroy the father, not the mother. For Veeder, Mary’s real rage in her life was toward her distant and emotionally unavailable father, and so the victims of the creature move inexorably back through the alphabet of names to “Alphonse,” the father, the Alpha of the Universe.

Perhaps the most provocative essay to focus on the female body is Susan Winnett’s “Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure,” which begins with the invitation, “first, let us return to the question of orgasm.” Boldly, Winnett reinterprets the three male-narrated sections of the novel according to “the different narrative logic – and the very different possibilities of pleasure – that emerge when issues such as incipience, repetition, and closure are reconceived in terms of an experience of the female body.” The central bodily experiences conveyed in *Frankenstein*, according to Winnett, are giving birth and breast-feeding:

Shelley’s use of the rhythms and dynamics of the experience of birth criticizes the culture’s association of detumescence and “significant discharge” with ending and sense making. In its unrelenting insistence on the demands made by the figure whose existence turns the scientist’s triumphant *consummatum est* into a new beginning, Shelley’s narrative poses questions not accommodated in a *Masterplot* and gestures toward an economy in which another consideration of the relations among beginning, middles, and ends would yield different results.<sup>18</sup>

Winnett’s emphasis on the pleasures of the female body suggests the influence of French feminists Cixous and Irigaray. This focus on the female body (if not on its pleasures) is sustained in Paul Youngquist’s 1991 article, “*Frankenstein*: The Mother, the Daughter, and the Monster,” which argues that it is not the father who was the target of Mary’s critique in the novel, but the mother – specifically, Mary Wollstonecraft’s rationalist, almost bodiless, form of feminism: “[O]ne of Shelley’s central tenets is that her mother’s feminism reduces the human to a rational corpse.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly, writing on *Frankenstein* from a biographical perspective has led feminist critics to a new assessment of Wollstonecraft’s life and work, and one of the results of the work on Shelley has been a renaissance in studies of her mother’s influence on cultural and literary history. \*

As we turn to more recent approaches, it is worth noting Fred Botting’s reflexive study of *Frankenstein* criticism, *Making Monstrous: “Frankenstein,” Criticism, Theory*. Botting ventures that the dialectical relationship between Victor and his creature reveals “a partial glance away from the repetitions of opposition and difference, of this hidden law of textuality, that offers no

mastery and confers precious little authority.” Reading the novel through one critical approach can only lead, according to Botting, to a recognition of the “monstrous differences of the text . . . *Frankenstein* seems to foreground the contradictions and conflicts of and between positions.” Because Botting’s reading responds to Mary Jacobus’s and Margaret Homans’s attempts to locate the feminine, he reconsiders the same scene that they focused on – Victor’s destruction of the unfinished female creature:

The destruction of the female binds the monster closely to humanity, and Victor in particular, and foregrounds the need for a monster to haunt the margins of those networks of signification which define humanity . . . The monster’s marginal place, neither outside nor inside, is thus the place of differences, of others whose monstrousness is that they cannot be finally fixed in one place alone. Indeed, the system in which meaning is produced could not function without such monstrous elements.

Reviewing theories of political monstrosity from Hobbes to Burke, Botting concludes that monstrosity represents “a complex and changing resistance to established authority.”<sup>20</sup> As befits a critic who posits the critically constructed nature of *Frankenstein*, Botting’s work on the novel cannot be neatly categorized. It veers from political to psychoanalytical to linguistic; as we shall see, it also anticipates the approaches of cultural studies and disability studies. Notwithstanding Botting’s epigram – “*Frankenstein* is a product of criticism” – there must be few novels that could occasion such a diversity of approaches in a single study.

### Recent views: cultural studies, queer theory, and disability studies

So what is the difference that gender makes? continues to be the dominant question in feminist, psychoanalytical, and materialist readings of the novel. And clearly the critical discussions have centered on the realities of Shelley’s life as a daughter, a wife, and a mother herself. Critics have gone back and forth, assigning the mother or the father, the husband, siblings, or children the central position of importance in her creative work. The decade of the 1990s, however, which began with the publication of Stephen Behrendt’s *Approaches to Teaching Shelley’s “Frankenstein”* (containing an excellent essay by Susan J. Wolfson on feminist approaches) saw feminist readings expand to include the insights of post-colonial theory, queer theory, cultural studies, and disability studies. Many of the critics working in these latter and newer areas have been deeply indebted to the feminist approaches of the 1980s.

Post-colonial theory, propelled by Edward Said's seminal study, *Orientalism*,<sup>21</sup> has been used fruitfully to explore the complicated class, race, and gender issues raised by *Frankenstein*, as well as a number of other works. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's oft-cited "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," focusing on *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* in addition to *Frankenstein*, reads the latter work as "a text of nascent feminism that remains cryptic."<sup>22</sup> Sketching out the Orientalist ideology operating in the novel, Spivak briefly analyzes the objectification of Safie as an eroticized Other, and compares her to the similarly fetishized dark women in Brontë's and Rhys's novels. But in a 1992 postscript, Spivak at last states explicitly what was only implicit in the earlier version: "The feminist dimension of [*Frankenstein*] provides a frame that is critical of the effort to construct a creature without womb-life and infancy. But when it comes to the colonial subject's pre-history, Shelley's political imagination fails. (We have seen that in postcoloniality, the subject mourns the unlamented death of this previous history.)"<sup>23</sup> This remarkably suggestive observation positions post-colonialism within a psychoanalytical framework, implying that colonized subjects mourn the loss of their oppressors, much as children mourn the death of their abusers, much as the creature mourns the death of Victor. Spivak indicts *Frankenstein*, then, for being complicitous with its cultural, social, and historical conditions, rather than standing apart from that history and condemning its use and abuse of others (women, creatures, children).

Another important practice of post-colonial criticism, one indebted to the new historicism, is to locate the meaning of the text in the socio-political context in which it was composed. H. L. Malchow examines the material and historical contexts of African emigration into Britain and the West Indies, arguing that Frankenstein's creature needs to be read within the "tradition in which the mixed-race person was often represented as an ambivalent creature torn between different cultures and loyalties, an outcast, a misfit, and a biological unnatural."<sup>24</sup> D. S. Neff invokes the growing Anglo-Indian population and their awkward presence in England to suggest that fascination and repugnance toward dark-skinned or half-caste peoples alternates in the novel.

Safie, the dark-skinned daughter of a Muslim father and a Coptic (Christian) mother, figures prominently in several post-colonial readings. Most recently, Ronald Bush has focused on one of the central issues in post-colonial theory – the diaspora – or the forced dispersal of people from their native land. Bush claims that the creature's speech "is unintelligible outside a colonial context. In case the horror of the monster viewing himself through the eyes of his European neighbors was not pointed enough for her

readers, Shelley explicitly aligns his anguish with Europe's relations to the Orient." Comparing the creature to Safie's father, Bush concludes that "after their rejection, the monster, like Safie's father before him, turns to the wickedness that has been expected of him,"<sup>25</sup> by Western racial stereotypes of the "evil" Oriental. Elizabeth Bohls's 1994 article explores not only the use of late eighteenth-century British theories of race, but also the influence of Edmund Burke's aesthetic theories. Placing *Frankenstein* in the context of other popular travel literature of the day: Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, Thomas Pennant's *View of Hindoostan*, Bryan Edwards's *History of the West Indies*, Bohls sees Shelley's work not as an endorsement of Western hegemony, but instead as an indictment of Burkean aesthetics, an "inherently imperial discourse, structured by principles of hierarchy and exclusion."<sup>26</sup>

Cultural studies is an approach to literature that examines both popular and literary works in relation to a larger cultural matrix of other writings – historical, political, or commercial. For instance, *Frankenstein* might be examined in light of contemporary conduct books on the proper behavior of parents or children, or in relation to newspaper accounts of mixed-race peoples, or in juxtaposition to other popular literary genres of its day – the sentimental romance, the scientific fantasy, or the educational treatise. Again, one can see how feminist criticism has influenced such an approach, as feminism has long posited that "high" culture is a system that favors males and that acts to ensure the continued power and status of the patriarchy. By examining what has traditionally been considered "low" cultural artifacts, feminists have opened up and made available many works written by women and neglected by the literary establishment.

Class issues frequently form the basis of cultural studies readings. As early as 1983, Anca Vlasopolos located the novel's "hidden logic" in the author's "fusion of the socio-political forces used to ensure the survival of the aristocracy with the private drama of a man who sees himself as ineluctably driven to incest." Vlasopolos also argues that another subtext of the novel concerns its indictment of a class system that has created "an aesthetics of exclusion to perpetuate its ascendancy," hence explaining why the novel was banned in her native South Africa in 1955. In an intelligent analysis of the work's subversive sympathies, Vlasopolos claims: "Class selection, namely the survival of the upper class and its will-to-power, appears in incident after incident throughout the novel and acts as the barely visible crack which in the end causes the collapse of the house of Frankenstein."<sup>27</sup> More recently, the Italian critic Franco Moretti has analyzed the creature in the novel as informed by Marx's theory of the alienation of the proletariat. In an influential chapter in his book *Signs Taken for Wonders*,<sup>28</sup> Moretti has discussed

the creature alongside Dracula, the displaced aristocrat, as the two archetypal and intensely anxiety-producing class-based figures in nineteenth-century British culture.

Cultural studies criticism has drawn on, and in turn responded to, Ellen Moers's politically charged notion of the "female gothic." Most recently, my essay, "Fantasy, Trauma, and Gothic Daughters: *Frankenstein* as Therapy,"<sup>29</sup> places the novel within the framework of the female Gothic tradition, labeled "Gothic feminism." I differ from Moers in seeing the true woman in the text as "Victor," a Gothic feminist who manipulates others to do "his" bidding, all the way washing "his" hands of responsibility for the elimination of his family – rivals for the lost mother's love. Lee Heller distinguishes among three different types of Gothic: horror, sentimental-educational, and philosophical. Each variety of Gothic does different "cultural work" on its specific audience, each of whom came from a different class of readers. A further cultural studies approach has been to analyze the varieties of popular cultural adaptations of the novel, including the myriad film productions inspired by it (see chapters 4 and 5).

Cultural studies readings also juxtapose literary works with nonliterary, even ephemeral, texts, for instance, scientific beliefs or superstitions current at the time of a novel's composition. Anne K. Mellor's critical biography, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, argues that Shelley criticizes the scientific discoveries and increasing technological advancements that were taking place in her own day, advocating instead a more humane, sympathetic, and nurturing use of science to improve human life. For Mellor, the novel charts how Nature, a specifically feminine power, avenges herself on Victor's benighted – rational, objective, Enlightenment – masculinity.

But in addition to working in a feminist-cultural studies mode, Mellor was one of the earliest critics to recognize the homosocial dynamic operating in the text, writing that Victor's "most passionate relationships are with men rather than with women . . . In the place of a normal heterosexual attachment to Elizabeth, Victor has substituted a homosexual obsession with his creature, an obsession that in his case is energized by a profound desire to reunite with his dead mother, by becoming himself a monster."<sup>30</sup> Such a recognition lies at the center of numerous queer-theory readings of the novel, which are in part motivated by the feminist analysis of gender as a cultural construct. One of the central concerns of queer studies has been the heretofore unrecognized issue of "male homosocial desire," a concept initially defined by Eve Sedgwick. Her pioneering work, *Between Men*, identifies masculinity, paranoia, and homophobia as the bases of male Gothic texts. According to Sedgwick, British patriarchy is predicated on "male homosocial desire," or the bonds both of competition and attraction that arise in the

heretofore masculine arenas of sports, military service, and the professions. Even so, men are encouraged to experience “homophobia” or “homosexual panic” at the thought of physical contact with another man. For Sedgwick, *Frankenstein* is one of the texts that explores the ambivalences of what she calls “paranoid Gothic”: “Romantic novels in which a male hero is in a close, usually murderous relation to another male figure, in some respects his ‘double,’ to whom he seems to be mentally transparent.”<sup>31</sup> For Sedgwick, Victor and his creature/double are engaged in the classic homosocial dyad gone horribly wrong so that the murderous rejection of the bond between them can only end in both their deaths.

Jonathan Dollimore, another queer-studies theorist, offers a suggestive theory of the “perverse” that directs us to moments when the binary structures that give meaning to society (male/female; heterosexual/homosexual) break down without being totally dissolved or eradicated.<sup>32</sup> According to this approach, Victor enters the realm of the perverse when he begins to create his monster, knowing that by so doing, he is rupturing his society’s normative codes of behavior and binary structures (male/female; God/man). For James Holt McGavran, Victor is driven to create a giant male who would adore him because of his own unconscious “homoerotic desire” – desire that turns quickly to panic. Alternatively, in a recent lesbian reading, Frann Michel sees in the novel a series of gaps, absences, and contradictions when the subject of same-sex desire between women occurs. Michel criticizes feminists like Homans for her heterosexist bias and her refusal to recognize desire between women in the novel. Similarly, Bette London criticizes the heterosexist bias in Veeder, whom she accuses of failing to recognize the homosexuality implicit in the narcissistic fetishizing of the male body. For London, “a feminist critique might best fulfill its project by . . . reading the presence of the novel’s self-consciously male texts to illuminate the absences they cover, to expose the self-contradictions they repress.”<sup>33</sup> And finally there is also a transgendered reading of *Frankenstein*, written by the transgendered writer Susan Stryker. In an autobiographical narrative that parallels the creature’s own narrative within the novel, Stryker reveals the anger she has experienced because of her pain and rejection, comparing it to the ostracism that “Frankenstein’s monster felt in its enmity to the human race.”<sup>34</sup> But it is not simply anger that Stryker describes. She also compares the reconstruction of her new female body to Victor’s assembly of the monster’s, noting that both operations bespeak the conservative attempt to stabilize gender in the service of heterosexism.

It is interesting, then, to observe in a transgendered woman’s reference to physical “disfigurement,” a clear link to disability-studies approaches to the novel. Disability studies, another relatively new and growing field of literary

criticism, also owes a good deal of its impetus to the influence of feminist and post-structuralist approaches to literary criticism. The purpose of disability studies, according to Simi Linton, is to criticize the constricted, inaccurate, and inhumane concepts of disability that have dominated academic inquiry, in particular the notion that disability is primarily a medical category. As Linton explains:

[T]he medicalization of disability casts human variation as deviance from the norm, as pathological condition, as deficit, and significantly, as an individual burden and personal tragedy. Society, in agreeing to assign medical meaning to *disability*, colludes to keep the issue within the purview of the medical establishment, to keep it a personal matter and “treat” the condition and the person with the condition rather than “treating” the social processes and policies that constrict disabled people’s lives . . . [Our goal] is the reinterpretation of *disability* as a political category and to the social changes that could follow such a shift.<sup>35</sup>

From this definition, then, one can see how the creature could be interpreted as “disabled” in a society that values external beauty (as defined by the aesthetic theories of Edmund Burke), conformity, and stable gender and class determinacy. Not surprisingly, therapists, social workers, and educators have used film versions of *Frankenstein* to stimulate discussion among the disabled.

Thus far, a few critics have seized on *Frankenstein* as a paradigmatic text that expresses the “otherness” of living as differently abled in a world of able, hostile, or indifferent people. In “The Monster’s Human Nature,” the biologist Stephen Jay Gould places the novel within this context by exploring the nature/nurture debate in regard to the evolution of the monster. Gould argues that “the creature becomes a monster because he is cruelly ensnared by one of the deepest predispositions of our biological inheritance – our aversion toward seriously malformed individuals.” For Gould, it is a “mammalian pattern” to inherit an “instinctive aversion to serious malformation,” which needs to be tempered by “learning and understanding.” The creature in Shelley’s novel represents, for Gould, the disabled person who is born into a society that is genetically programmed to reject and persecute him for his physical differences. For Gould, Shelley uses an extreme case to explore the nature versus nurture debate: “[N]ature can only supply a predisposition, while culture shapes specific results . . . [we must all] judge people by their qualities of soul, not by their external appearances.”<sup>36</sup> More recently, Denise Gigante, in her article “Facing the Ugly: The Case of *Frankenstein*,”<sup>37</sup> traces the etymology and history of the term “ugly,” placing Shelley’s use of an “ugly” character in its historical, social, and political contexts. In treating



ugliness as a disability, Shelley's novel reveals the philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic bases for the cruelty we heap on others not like ourselves. The "otherness" of the creature, founded in its physical appearance and size, is yet another manifestation of disability, a permanent physical condition that the subject can never alter. The responses that the monster experiences from his creator and society – rejection, fear, hatred, and punishment – can all be compared to those described by other disabled writers or characters.

So is it valid to claim, as Botting has, that *Frankenstein* is a "product of criticism, not a work of literature"? Clearly, one has to wonder what status and reputation *Frankenstein* would have now if feminist literary critics had not "rediscovered" the book with such passion and imagination in the 1970s. The fact that the novel proved to be such fertile ground for so many different critical schools has no doubt led to its installation as the most frequently taught canonical novel written by a woman in the early nineteenth century. But to imply that literary critics "created" the novel as a work of literature is not fair to the work's artistry or complexity. *Frankenstein* may be, in the words of one of its most acute readers, a "flawed" novel, but its power as a literary work is undeniable. It is the "mother-lode" of feminist criticism, as well as the text on which many literary critics have tested their assumptions and theories. It continues to entrance, irritate, and puzzle readers and critics alike because it speaks at once – in so many different contradictory voices – to so many issues that are central to what we make of being "human."

## NOTES

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