

2019

## A Conversation Between Mother and Son

Sheryl Kayne  
*Sacred Heart University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/faculty>

Digital Commons part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)  
Commons

---

### Network Recommended Citation

Kayne, S. (2019). A conversation between mother and son. In A. McBain (Ed.), *Imagining monsters* (pp. 17-25). Fairfield Scribes & Westport Writes.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in SHU Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact [ferribyp@sacredheart.edu](mailto:ferribyp@sacredheart.edu), [lysobeyb@sacredheart.edu](mailto:lysobeyb@sacredheart.edu).

SHERYL KAYNE

## **A Conversation Between Mother and Son**

**Sheryl Kayne**

WHAT A STRANGE TURN OF events. How had she become the baby and he the parent? Here she was in the third bedroom, decorated to look exactly like the one she grew up in, transplanted from her parents' home, to her wedded home, to her son and daughter-in-law's home. The only additions between then and now were the wedding bed her parents gave her when she married her love, Percy Bysshe Shelley, along with his favorite chair, her seat of inspiration and insight. Soon her legacy of memories, words, and possessions would stay right where they were when she was finally reunited with her husband.

The only thing keeping her earthbound was the completion of her final book. She approached her writing chair slowly, her slight dowager's hump making it difficult to reach the rear of the chair. As the buttoned brocade welcomed her thin frame and white curls, her breath caught. "Hunh!" squeezed out from her lungs as her thoughts, discomfort, and pleasure all merged.

"Oh, my," she gasped out loud, "that's it! How delightful." She giggled as the words danced across her brain, reached over for the pen and paper on the side table right next to her, but instead, knocked them off onto the floor.

The bedroom door swung open. "Mother!" Her son Percy looked alarmed, rushing into her room. "Shall I fetch the doctor for you?"

"No, please, hand me my pen and paper." Only slightly winded, she forced a smile as a signal to him that he could relax. "I had such a marvelous idea to change the ending of *G. Frankenstein*. It's so lovely I need to catch it before it disappears into the wind or the vacuum of my withering brain."

He handed her the pen and paper which she took and began quickly writing notes. He looked at her, so small, seated in his father's chair that she referred to as her 'genius chair.'

"But Mother, Jane and I heard you choke and cry out."

"No, that was a laugh, which felt rather liberating." She held up the paper, already half-filled. "I received the gift of insight and reacted with glee. Now, for the very last time, I must rework this Frankenstein character before I disappear with the sunset."

He sighed and gave a half-smile. "This is not the first time you've considered a manuscript your last." Sitting next to her,

he was happy to see her blue eyes bright with knowledge and purpose.

"No, but this is the first time the doctor has instructed you to keep me as comfortable as possible with all of his special concoctions. I smell the eucalyptus oil and herbal wraps from here. What I really want to know is exactly where you hid his treasure trove of killer remedies to relieve the pain of my impending demise?" She paused, looking at his shocked expression. He was such a love, always kind and concerned about her vicissitudes, moods, and needs. She was blessed, but chose not to miss the drama of the moment. Folding her hands primly in her lap, she mimicked the extraordinary list of potions she'd overheard Dr. Lowry recite on his last visit: "'Tarantula Hispanica, Tarantula Cubensis, Androctonus, Phosphorus, Antimonium Tartaricum, Lachesis, Carbo Vegetabilis, Heroinum, Arsenicum Album.' Do not forget the morphine, the 'goddess of sleep' to assist an unconscious transition out of this body into death." She waited while he processed that the end might truly be close at hand. "Percy, my body threatens to give in and give up, but my brain is still very much at work."

She was always there for him, encouraging and supporting whatever he pursued. She taught him unconditional love, which he knew would keep him grounded through the pain of losing her. "You win, brilliant authoress and magnificent mother. Show me the newest ending to your *Frankenstein* sequel, our family's literature creations for future generations to read and enjoy. Are you still calling your book *G. Frankenstein*?"

"Yes, 'G' for Gloria," she responded.

"Really? I thought the 'G' was for *Girl Frankenstein*."

“I assumed you would figure it out. Hah, you didn’t.” She loved occasionally outwitting him. “That’s wonderful. You’ve read it through a number of times now and did not realize that Victor Frankenstein had a younger sister named Gloria, whom he called Glorious.” She stared into his eyes, wanting to read and remember his reaction of surprise and delight.

“That explains it much better. I certainly have greater insight into your writing than the average reader.” He paused, waiting for her to object to his line of thinking, but she focused on adding in sentence after sentence, line after line. “Perhaps, while rewriting the end, you can strengthen that connection. How clever of you. Glorious Frankenstein, beautiful. Victor created a girl monster in the vision of his sister.” He seemed so pleased with his realization, she hesitated to respond and diminish his moment.

“Percy, you are so fortunate I love you completely and forgive you your momentary shortcomings.” She leaned over as if to rub his dimpled chin the way she did when he was young. Unfortunately, she was too far away and was about to fall when he caught her and lifted her back up. She acted as if nothing had happened and stared out the window, watching a cardinal pose against the lilies. The garden needed weeding. Perhaps she could do a little bit of that tomorrow. For now, she would pour every remaining drop of herself into this final manuscript.

“Gloria is not just any girl,” Mary licked her lips as if enjoying something delicious. “She was Victor’s sister, who at age fifteen suffered a horrific accident. Her horse faltered jumping over a stream, lost his footing, and pinned her against a rock.”

“Mercy,” gasped Percy as it hit him like a ton of galloping horses, hard, right in his gut. “You mean she was comatose following the accident, not dead?” He’d grown up analyzing language and composition from every angle. From his earliest years in school through earning graduate degrees, she read everything he wrote, offering commentary, encouragement and guidance. She never made direct demands of him but provided lists of additional options to be considered.

“Bravo, Percy,” she looked up from her note-writing. “Victor pronounced her dead from drowning, fully aware she was in a coma. His love for her, and determination to bring people back from the dead, overrode everything else.”

She paused because Percy seemed lost in thought.

“What an interesting angle,” he said. “Victor was obsessed with keeping his sister alive, maintaining her life rather than creating a brand new one from pieces of the dead.”

It all played before his eyes—Victor rigging the coffin for the burial service to allow her to continue breathing. He must have inserted screens to protect her from being hit by dirt and stones. The minute the service was over and the ditch diggers slung the first shovels of dirt, he paid them their day’s wages and begged them to leave, swearing an oath, “She was my only sister. I owe her this act of love to care for her and dig her grave myself.”

“Do not forget,” added Mary, “it was such a hot day the men would left. Gloria’s brain and body lay safely, protected and dormant for years.”

“Oh, Mother, you are so amazing. I believe Victor created nasogastric intubation by inserting a feeding tube through her nostrils directly into the abdominal wall.” He paused as they shared most impressive eye rolls.

“I must admit that seeing everything through fresh eyes, Victor’s original creature was horrific in every way,” she adds. “Gloria awakens, angry at losing five years of her life while everyone else moved on. She remains lovely to look at, albeit a bit on the gaunt side, but she was always an inherently vindictive, jealous, and angry monster.”

Silence surrounded them as she continued making adjustments:

- Gloria: Anger at Victor that he did not let her die or help her die, and everyone else kept living. Deal with him later.
- At age 15, she and Jeremy Lee professed their love for each other and promise to marry. Kill him.
- Jeremy married Mary Beth. Kill her.

Percy tried peering at her pages but she pulled away. “Where exactly are you going with this?”

Just then, Jane knocked and opened the door. “Mother, how are you?” The women shared a smile and Mary reached out for a gentle hug. “About ready for supper?”

“Would you mind holding off a bit?” Percy asked.

“Of course not,” she murmured.

Percy rose to walk Jane out of the room, gently putting his arm around her shoulders and giving her a kiss. He took the opportunity upon reentering the room to stand directly by his father’s chair, glancing at the pages Mary had dropped onto the table. “What a wonderful shift. The girl monster lives on and the doctor dies.”

She grabbed the handful of papers and smacked at his legs. “Percy, you are much too old to be mischievous and sneaky. Read it tomorrow.”

“What I just read says it all and makes sense! Gloria knew Victor had no choice but to kill her, since she had killed two people.” He basked in his own zeal and cleverness. “She murdered him before he could strike her. My God, for sure, more brilliant than ever because not only is this Frankenstein monster a woman whose life and death depended upon Victor, she wins by living on, appearing normal on the outside while being a vicious killer on the inside.” His voice trailed off, seeing the beauty of it all.

“How absolutely frightening,” his head shook, side-to-side, in disbelief. “A beautiful young girl, a serial killer protected by the knowledge that no one knows she exists, which brings us to the next problem. How will her family and community react to her suddenly being alive rather than dead?”

Watching and listening to his interpretation, there was no need to respond. He would figure it all out soon. Mary remembered how much she loved the days and nights with her husband, bantering and brainstorming words—beginnings, endings, and plots in such detail they often forgot to eat and sleep. Her son filled the void left by her husband’s death. It was so difficult knowing she would soon be leaving him, but reassuring to hear how much he appreciated her final book.

“I’m so proud of you, Percy,” she sounded tired but managed to raise her arms for a hug. “I need to finish these last few details, then it is up to you to complete the final steps toward publication.”

“Mother, this is a masterpiece, I just know it,” said Percy, “proving I am my father’s son, and yours.” He kissed the top of her head.

“Percy.” She sounded so tired. “Can you please wait until tomorrow morning? I will open my bedroom door for you to come in and we will read it aloud together. I do, as always, appreciate your insight and feedback.”

“Just promise me to add in something really offensive for Glorious Gloria to do, like drinking their blood,” he made a wicked face and then backed off, “or something along those lines.”

Mary retorted, “She snips off their pinkies for her own personal pinky collection, with the pinky ring still in place.”

“Really?” he gasped, but one look at his mother told him she was teasing. “Okay.” He held up his hands in surrender. “I understand, author at work. I’ll leave soup for you at your door, or may I bring it in?” Her piercing look said no, she was to be left alone.

The next morning, her bedroom door remained closed, an odd occurrence, since she was always the first one awake in the house. The soup tray sat where he’d left it the night before, but she often skipped the evening meal. Perhaps she had just fallen asleep from exhaustion after writing all night.

He waited. It was still early. He drank his tea and cut a slice of the honey-wheat bread Jane baked the day before, slathering it with butter and orange marmalade. He looked again at the closed door. He prepared her breakfast tray, walked to her room, and gently asked, “Mother?” No response. He hesitated. Something told him not to open the door. He returned to the kitchen. “Jane, will you please come with me? Mother might still be sleeping. We need to check in on her.”

She quickly dried her hands on her apron, slid her right arm through his left, and matched his stride. He knocked.

There was no answer. Together, they opened the door onto the scene of his mother and her mother-in-law. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was seated in the genius chair, leaning to the side, her eyes closed, and pen in the hand resting on top of her book *G. Frankenstein*.

That was the day, February 1, 1851, that Mary Shelley did not wake up.