

2019

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### Recommended Citation

Ashby, Campbell (2019) "Personal Problems = Great Literature: Shelley's Motherhood Issues Reflected In Frankenstein," *Celebrating Writers and Writing in our Communities*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/rwc/vol2/iss1/22>

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# **Personal Problems = Great Literature: Shelley's Motherhood Issues Reflected in Frankenstein**

**By: Campbell Ashby**

We are designed by nature to feel love and adoration towards creatures who drool, cry, throw up, and poop all the time. We all love them; they're babies. But what would happen if those natural instincts weren't there? What if you're just used to abandonment with all things parental in life? This type of abandonment happened during Mary Shelley's lifetime, her mother dying from giving birth, and also suffering many of her own miscarriages. In her novel, Frankenstein, which she wrote while experiencing the aftermath of this harsh reality, Victor Frankenstein creates a monster, going against the natural cycle of life, which turns into a true monster after receiving no love from his own father. The connection typically made from experiencing childbirth is absent, and that is what creates their horrifying relationship. All the women portrayed in her novel experience hardships, which ultimately lead to death. These difficulties reflect certain experiences from Mary Shelley's own life. Mary Shelley's personal problems with motherhood are mirrored through relationships of parents and children in her novel, Frankenstein. Her personal experience caused irreparable damage to her maternal instincts, and this can be viewed through the women portrayed in her novel as well as the relationship between Victor and the Monster.

During her life, Mary Shelley experienced many hardships relating to motherhood, which influenced how she portrayed motherhood in her novels she wrote later in life, including *Frankenstein*. In her first few months of life, “Her mother, the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, had died from complications arising from her birth” (Gunderman). This created the lack of a mother figure in her life, only being left with her father and some older siblings. Having no mother figure while growing up, besides a stepmother who she didn't get along with, she fell victim to an imbalanced home. By having this absence of a mother or mother figures, she grew up not experiencing the special love that only a mother can really provide. Later on in her life, “Shelley's own attempts at motherhood would result in multiple miscarriages and the deaths of three children,” (Gunderman). This experience was the cause of her postpartum depression, as she most likely felt as though the miscarriages were all her fault. Feeling as though she was a killer, she fell into a pit of guilt and anger directed towards herself.

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley creates a failing father and son relationship between Victor and the monster in order to express her depression in real life. Mary Shelley essentially writes herself into the novel as Frankenstein, with each encounter in each of their lives eerily similar to each other's. They create a monster to perhaps settle the need for a child for Shelley, and the need for a child of science for Frankenstein. Because Shelley had not much experience with her own children, she is able to create a distant and dissonant relationship between Frankenstein and the monster. A cold detachment from what it means to be a parent resides in Mary Shelley, and she expresses this by portraying Victor as

unable to provide the love necessary for the monster to become not so much a monster. When Victor first creates the monster, the monster wakes up and Victor describes his actions as, "one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped and rushed downstairs" (Shelley 56). Victor's initial reaction towards the monster is to run and hide, seemingly to defend himself, but truthfully the monster is just like a newborn baby. The monster has never seen the world before, he doesn't speak a language, doesn't really know anything, and as he reaches out towards his father, Victor runs away in fear. This reaction causes the monster to feel rejected and unwanted. To have the most important person in his life, a parent, shun him, damages the monster's understanding of love and compassion. This damage will later generate further problems. Victor's reaction mirrors Shelley's experiences with children; because of her lack of maternal instincts, she is able to express her confusion and fear of having a child to actually take care of through this relationship between Victor and the monster. With the inference that Shelley is Frankenstein, she portrays herself as not being able to give love to her child. This demonstrates how confused and fearful she is of motherhood. Later in the novel, after the monster has learned things about the world, and learns of hostility expressed towards him even from his father, he exclaims "you are my creator, but I am your master; obey!" (Shelley 181). The monster is resentful towards Victor, expressing his anger by killing everyone he loves before and after he exclaims this. He wants to make Victor's life as miserable as his own, and when Victor doesn't comply with his wants, the monster decides that he is his creator's master. This transition of power is important in order to portray how the lack of someone's

love can create a monstrous being. Shelley is most likely trying to convey how afraid she is of motherhood, asking herself the question, what if my child hates me? Frankenstein's and Shelley's fear of their own children proves how personal horrors can lead to permanent damage.

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley portrays Elizabeth as submissive and passive in order to express her personal struggles with motherhood. Throughout *Frankenstein*, Elizabeth is portrayed as a caregiver, comforting Victor through letters sent back and forth. She succumbs to his secrecy and aggression caused by the creation of the monster, expressing passive emotions by being unable to argue or pressure him to tell her the secret. Later in the novel, “[Elizabeth] was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed,” after being killed by Victor's monster (Shelley 212). Elizabeth's death is just a result of Victor's own mistakes and stupid decisions. Because he showed his creation no love, it turned to killing everyone that he did love in order to make it so that no one would love either of them. Because it is understood that Shelley mirrors herself in Victor Frankenstein, it can be implied that she too feels as though she killed Elizabeth, Shelley feels as though she made herself depressed, and that it is all her fault she's experienced so many hardships. This is suggested because it's Victor's fault that the monster killed Elizabeth due to the lack of compassion and love in their relationship, hence Shelley's inclination to take the blame.

Mary Shelley portrays Justine as submissive and timid in *Frankenstein*, in order to project her anger into a positive outlet. Justine is Frankenstein's family's servant who gets tried for the murder of William, Victor's youngest brother. They

find a photograph of William in her pocket, planted there by the monster, and that is enough to land her in jail until more evidence is discovered. When in jail, Victor comes to visit her and she claims, "My confessor has besieged me; he threatened and menaced, until I almost began to think that I was the monster that he said I was. He threatened excommunication and hell fire in my last moments," (Frankenstein 73). The priest threatened her in order to make her confess to the crime she did not commit, telling her that she would go to jail if she did not confess. She confesses, and by doing so, she expresses the natural submissiveness she has from being a woman. Succumbing to the priest's threats portrays women's passiveness towards men, which is important because it suggests that Shelley felt as though she hurt people around her during her miscarriages, with the implication that the women in Frankenstein mirror Shelley's own children. As the priest forces Justine to confess, it indicates that Shelley felt angry towards her babies that died, conveying anger towards them. Although, it can also be perceived that anger stems out of confusion, so this would also suggest that Shelley felt confused as to why her babies would die; why would it happen to her?

Ultimately, Mary Shelley wrote Frankenstein as a way of putting her depression into coherent thoughts and ideas. Her miscarriages and the death of her mother was the cause of her postpartum depression, which she utilizes to write one of the greatest pieces of literature in the 20th century. By mirroring her own experiences and thoughts through Victor Frankenstein, she is able to convey to the readers the struggle she went through. She portrays the women in the novel as submissive in order to discuss how she feels about her own children, that she feels

responsible for their deaths. By discussing her personal struggles in her novel, Shelley suggests to the readers that she felt there was no outlet for her depression and feelings towards the miscarriages at the time. Women in today's society are often encouraged to seek therapy, and there are also many support groups that can be accessed at the touch of a button. It was more of a difficult matter before the suffrage movement though, as women were taught that it was improper etiquette to discuss things such as one's postpartum depression; so, Shelley's struggles with motherhood encourage readers today to be appreciative of the sources available, as they weren't always there. Shelley clearly describes the emotions going through a woman's mind when going through such hardships through the characters and relationships in *Frankenstein*.

## Annotated Bibliography

Gibbens, Sarah. "Is maternal instincts only for moms? Here's the science." National Geographic.

9 May 2018. Web. 09 January 2019.

In this source, Gibbens explores how our biology and oxytocin affect parental instincts in life. She explains the levels of oxytocin raising a significant amount after a mother held her child for the first time. Being from National Geographic, we expect this source to be trustworthy and able to provide important facts. This article helped me understand the scientific background of maybe why Mary Shelley portrayed her characters the way she did. The article also helped present logical and tangible reasons for Shelley having irreparable damage to her maternal instincts.

Gunderman, Richard. "What Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* teaches us about the need for mothers."

The Conversation. 8 May 2018. Web. 09 January 2019.

In this source, Gunderman, a professor of medicine, explains how Shelley's *Frankenstein* helps express the need for mothers. He does this by talking about Shelley's life experiences and then the book, discussing what happened in a chronological order of her life. This article helped form a basis of how I wanted to format my own essay, as I also decided to write my essay in a somewhat chronological order. This article also helped provide a trustworthy source about what exactly happened with her children and her mother.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones. 1818.