Angels and Monsters in *Frankenstein*

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s first major novel proved to be worthy of study since its very conception and has drawn much critical attention since then. A novel that firmly stakes its claim in the tradition of the Romantic and the Gothic in the nineteenth century, *Frankenstein* had an unconventional start and reflects some serious parts of Shelley’s own interesting life, as well as the lives of the many very prominent literary and philosophical figures that surrounded her.

The story began when Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was on a vacation in Lake Leman in Switzerland with her already married lover at the time and future husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Among the company of some of the most important intellectuals of the day, Shelley witnessed the leisurely discussions between Percy and Lord Byron and, during evenings by the fire, the group entertained themselves by reading German ghost stories while they were stuck indoors due to inclement weather. Eventually, Byron proposed a challenge for himself, Percy Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, and Polidori that involved them each authoring an original ghost story. Disregarding Polidori’s rendition of Bysshe Shelley’s vampire story into a novelette *The Vampyre*, Mary was the only participant to finish the challenge. A story that started with just a few pages and began “It was a dreary night in November…” developed over the course of the next two years into a novel (Joseph 159). Thus, *Frankenstein* originated.

The novel begins with the letters of Robert Walton, the captain of a ship headed for the North Pole in search of great scientific wonders, to his sister. The quest comes to a halt when the
ship gets lodged in the ice and, while the crew is at a sort of standstill, they witness a strange figure in the distance who seems to be a man of gigantic stature being chased by another man on a sled. The ice breaks and the pursuer, Victor Frankenstein, is saved by Walton and his crew. Through Walton’s letters, the story of Frankenstein is relayed.

The inside narrative, told orally to Walton who records it in his letters, begins with childhood of Victor Frankenstein. Frankenstein describes a large, loving family, “No creature could ever have more tender parents than mine,” but a childhood of loss. His aunt dies and his cousin, Elizabeth, is sent to live with his father, a girl who is to marry Frankenstein as an adult. Before Frankenstein goes to college, his mother dies, and Elizabeth unselfishly takes on the duties previously upheld by Frankenstein’s mother. Frankenstein and his family realize the importance of duty and carrying on, so, despite his mother’s death, he leaves for school at the university of Ingolstadt, where he studies natural philosophy.

It is while he is at school that he develops an obsession with one thing. “One of the phaenomena which had peculiarly attracted my attention was the structure of the human frame, and, indeed, any animal endued with life. Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered as a mystery; yet with how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our inquiries. I revolved these circumstances in my mind, and determined thenceforth to apply myself more particularly to those branches of natural philosophy which relate to physiology” (Shelley 30). Frankenstein figures out the secret to creating life out of lifeless bodies and it becomes his greatest regret.

After the creature is created, Frankenstein flees from it, depriving it of its only desire, a family and somewhere to belong. The creature is innately good, but desires a life like that of his
creator, and is driven to evil. He causes miserable havoc on Frankenstein, killing everyone he loves, in vengeance of Frankenstein deserting him and then refusing to create another being with which the creature could live out its existence, no longer an ultimate outsider.

By the end of the novel, Frankenstein has lost everything except the hatred he feels from the creature he created. Walton witnesses Frankenstein going after the creature in order to kill it, a task that proves difficult as the creature is superior to non-mythical Frankenstein in many ways. Frankenstein dies on the ship in the company of Walton and Walton witnesses the creature come back for one last look at his creator and reveals a remorse that rivals that of Frankenstein during his life. Readers are left with an image of the creature drifting out of sight into the sea, promising his own self-destruction.

There are three versions of *Frankenstein*: Mary Shelley’s manuscripts, the 1818 publication and a major revised version published in 1831. The differences between the 1818 and the 1831 texts are significant, but the 1818 text is most often, as in virtually always, the text used in scholarship, especially changes in theory that do not mark that author’s last word as the final and authoritative. The 1818 text is the text that is mostly closely related to the story’s original conception and because it is the text that *Frankenstein’s* first audience encountered.

Right from the start, readers wondered about the intentions of such a horrific story. What could it possibly mean? What does the novel suggest about the principles of life? Criticism has been performed on the story of *Frankenstein* since 1818, and even before if Percy Shelley’s own ideas about the text are considered a part of its criticism.

From a biographical perspective, Christopher Small claims that the character of Frankenstein is a portrayal of Mary Shelley’s husband. He bases his argument on Frankenstein’s first name, Victor, apparently a name closely associate with Percy’s childhood and the theme of
victory in his poetry, as well as on the similarities between Frankenstein’s childhood and Percry’s own childhood (206).

William Veeder also analyzes it through biographical and reader response criticism, but he primarily looks at the text through a psychoanalytical lens, using the negative Oedipus as a jumping-off point. He has a conversation with feminist theory, under which he argues that the role of the father is neglected, and uses Freudian theory to expose the underemphasized role of the father. Veeder points out the role of father in both Mary and Percy Shelley’s lives. “Father looms so large for both Mary and Percy that no one critical approach can account for him fully. At their most idealistic – and thus most traditional – the Shelleys encourage a critical methodology which integrates the traditional disciplines of biographical and close textual analysis. By taking this approach to Mary’s later fiction and to Percy’s The Revolt of Islam, I can not only confirm the prominence of father for the Shelley’s but also establish the ideal against which their most subversive and important art was created” (Veeder 367). Veeder claims that the Shelleys’ desire for father was projected onto their art.

In much of the biographical and psychoanalytical criticism, though, Mary Shelley’s authorship is defined in terms of the patriarchal societal structure out of which she writes. Mary uses her pen as a “metaphorical penis,” a phrase coined by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in order to write a successful novel. If Shelley wanted to write a successful novel in the midst of the male authors before and around her, including her husband and her father, she had to write in a way that took on the conventions of the male conventions. In this essay, I will prove, through the text of Frankenstein, that she wrote a story about a monster while avoiding the creation of herself as one because it fits a particular, sensitive, patriarchal mold, but that, underneath the surface, there is a story that comes straight from her experience as a woman.
Judith Fetterley, in her Introduction to *The Resisting Reader*, speaks of literature in the male tradition, such as Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle.” Although Fetterley primarily discusses American literature, her reader response theories are applicable to all female writers and readers and are easily applied to *Frankenstein* in this case. Fetterley states, “In such fictions the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is required to identify against herself” (Fetterley 1036). She introduces the idea of the resisting reader, women reading texts with an attitude of apprehension toward and recognition of the elements that are not representative of humankind, but, instead, of only man, exclusive of women. She encourages women to read the canon in an “against the grain” sort of way in order to recognize the problematic notion that the canon is formed within a white, male, heterosexual circle of power.

Fetterley understood the political nature of literature, that it has the capacity to not only form a cultural consciousness, but to challenge it and to play a major role in changing it. The fact that American literature excluded women meant that it limited its readership and stabilized a patriarchal societal structure that was problematic and oppressive to the female voice. Since literature cannot be rewritten, Fetterley proposes instead telling and critiquing the things that the literature represents, causing a conversations and dialogue about the problem of an exclusive canon. She says, “Clearly, then, the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us. The consequence of this exorcism is the capacity for what Adrienne Rich describes as re-vision – ‘the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.’ And the consequence, in turn, of this re-vision is that books will no
longer be read as they have been read and thus will lose their power to bind us unknowingly to their designs” (Fetterley 1040).

At the same time Fetterley was forming and publishing her theories, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar were publishing powerful theories on feminist criticism that were similar in many ways. The authors asked “Where does such an implicitly or explicitly patriarchal theory of literature leave literary women? If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts? The question may seem frivolous, but … both the patriarchal etiology that defines a solitary Father God as the only creator of all things, and the male metaphors of literary creation that depend upon such an etiology, have long ‘confused’ literary women, readers and writers alike” (Gilbert and Gubar 7). If the pen is a penis, it is a tool that is “not only inappropriate but actually alien to women” (Gilbert and Gubar 8).

Gilbert and Gubar spoke out about the emotional anxiety that is attached to the female act of authorship due to the fact that women have no literary grandmothers to which to turn for a literary tradition, so their writing is infected with the tradition of the patriarchy in form as well as in content. They claim that, although there is an infection in women’s sentences, there is a feminine experience submerged in their writing that is not recognizable or appreciated through male readership, males who claim that female writing is limited to the female experience without realizing they themselves are limited in maleness as well. There is a two-fold problem women encounter when they attempt the pen; if they adhere to the male expectations, they will not be seen as the monster-woman, but, if they do not, they create a tradition for themselves as literary women. Therefore, women write out of the male literary tradition, but, underneath, there is submerged in the infected sentence a feminine experience and a female voice.
By becoming Fetterley’s resisting reader and using the theories of Gilbert and Gubar, *Frankenstein* becomes a text that has so much to offer under a critical lens by looking deeper into the things that are hidden underneath the text than its original readers had access to due to their limited scope of readership.

The first, most recognizable place that Shelley submerges a feminine experience is through the female characters of the novel. The frame narrative with which the story begins is completely void of a female presence. It could be argued that this is because an adventure such as Captain Walton’s has no place in the world of a woman. Men are the ones who go on adventures, who sail away in search of new discoveries, claiming land that has not yet been conquered.

The act of claiming land itself can be seen as a sexual act. Walton is on a journey to find the scientific secret behind the North Pole’s attraction of the needle, but it is a sort of “frontier” mentality because the destination of the crew is a place that is not civilized, a dangerous place that could hold any amount of unknown factors or obstacles. The crew going into the frontier, like the American frontier ideology, is reflective of a rape act because the land is always seen as a woman. In this sense, Walton and his crew are not just men who come upon Frankenstein upon happenstance. The novel is set up starting with a frame narrative that is void of women and full of men who are forging new trails, committing the same sort of rape act that is mythologized historically. In this sense, in the very absence of a female presence in the frame narrative, the novel reveals a system of patriarchy right from the start.

When Shelley creates female characters, their lives reflect the ways women must adhere to the expectations of society which are determined by men. The two major female characters in *Frankenstein* are Caroline and Elizabeth. The female characters are reflective of the angel and
the monster paradigm that Gilbert and Gubar discuss in their critical writing. The authors wrote “. . . a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her. Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must ‘kill’ the ‘angel in the house.’ In other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been ‘killed’ into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel’s necessary opposite and double, the ‘monster’ in the house, whose Medusa-face also kill female creativity” (17). Shelley literally kills off both the angel and the monster in her text, but this dynamic applies extremely well to Frankenstein in her biography as well. She writes Caroline and Elizabeth, who absolutely uphold the expectations of the angel of the house; Justine who gets caught somewhere in the middle of the spectrum; and, ultimately, Shelley creates a real, tangible, literal monster who suffers from a similar regionalizing and othering as in the feminine experience. By fitting her female characters into these roles, Shelley upholds her duty to kill the monster in herself by upholding the male expectations of women in her novel, but she also kills the anger in herself because, underneath the surface of her female characters, lies a distinctly feminine experience.

The first female that readers encounter in Frankenstein is Caroline Beaufort, Victor’s mother, through Victor’s retelling of the way in which his parents met and became married. Frankenstein’s father sought out Caroline’s father, a dear friend of his who was forced to leave due to financial failure. He found his friend dying from despair and misery and Caroline was faithfully looking after him. “His daughter attended him with the greatest tenderness; but she saw with despair that their little fund was rapidly decreasing, and that there was no other prospect of support. But Caroline Beaufort possessed a mind of an uncommon mould; and her courage rose to support her in her adversity. She procured plane work; she plaited straw; and by various
means contrived to earn a pittance scarcely sufficient to support life” (Shelley 18). When Caroline’s father dies, she is left with nothing, “an orphan and a beggar. This last blow overcame her; and she knelt by Beaufort’s coffin, weeping bitterly” when Frankenstein’s father comes to rescue her. “He came like a protecting spirit to the poor girl, who committed herself to his care, and after the interment of his friend, he conducted her to Geneva, and placed her under the protection of a relation. Two years after this event Caroline became his wife” (Shelley 18-19).

Just as Caroline must be taken under the power of a man when her father dies, Elizabeth must be taken care of by Frankenstein’s father when her mother dies. Elizabeth’s father writes to Frankenstein’s father, relinquishing all of his fatherly responsibilities. The Frankenstein family takes her in as one of their own and she is raised there. When Caroline dies, Elizabeth is expected to take over that expected role. “This period was spent sadly my mother’s death, and my speedy departure, depressed our spirits; but Elizabeth endeavored to renew the spirit of cheerfulness in our little society. Since the death of her aunt, her mind had acquired new firmness and vigour. She determined to fulfill her duties with the greatest exactness; and she felt that that most imperious duty, of rendering her uncle and cousins happy, had devolved upon her. She consoled me, amused her uncle, instructed my brothers, and I never beheld her so enchanting as at this time, when she was continually endeavouring to contribute to the happiness of others, entirely forgetful of herself” (Shelley 25).

Both of these women, especially Caroline as is evidenced by the way in which she sought out work and claimed a job that could traditionally be considered male work, would be perfectly capable to fend for themselves, if only society would allow them. When they are left on their own, they virtually have no choice but to accept to be taken over by the men around them in order to sustain their lives. Caroline was under the power of her father and when he was no
longer there, she was taken by Frankenstein’s father and transferred to another place by him until their marriage. Elizabeth was not wanted by her father as the only child of her mother when he decided to remarry after her own mother’s death and was therefore forced to become a member of the Frankenstein family in order to maintain any sort of quality of life. Both women are portrayed to be rendered virtually helpless without the guidance and when not under the control of some man.

Later, Frankenstein marries Elizabeth, as was planned from the beginning by Caroline, who quite possibly understood the implications of a marriage like this for Elizabeth as it would lock her into a place in society through marriage to a male. Before the marriage and throughout, although it is quite short-lived, Elizabeth is the definition of a supporting, consoling companion. Frankenstein himself even admits that she has the ultimate appeal to him when she completely gives herself to the service of the men in her family. She recognizes that something is not quite right with Frankenstein and, through their letters, it is obvious that she worries about him and she understands her duty to keep him contented. She desires to bring him happiness although she never fully understands what is going on, while the creature is the cause of Frankenstein’s strife and he later is the cause of Elizabeth’s death.

Both women are examples of angels of the house. Gilbert and Gubar define the angel of the house by saying her duty is “the surrender of her self – of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both – that is the beautiful angel woman’s key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead” (25). Caroline and Elizabeth hold the household together by instructing and raising the children while keeping the men absolutely contented, and they both die well before the end of
the novel. In this way, Shelley kills the angel by literally killing off the two women in the text who uphold the angel woman model.

Justine, the woman who is accused of the death of Frankenstein’s younger brother truly committed by the creature, lies somewhere in between the spectrum of the angel and the monster. Readers do not get much information about her family or her background, but she is a woman and she is being accused by men of a serious crime. She is a monster in the eyes of the public in that way, the source of the destruction of the potential of the young William. As a woman, she is doomed from the beginning when she is accused of a crime of this degree. Even Elizabeth, a dear friend, is swayed by the verdict of male judgment, but later convinced again by Frankenstein that Justine is indeed innocent.

Opposite the angel is the monster. In this case, Shelley creates an actual monster in the creature that Frankenstein creates. The monster woman is the woman who seduces the men, who is their ultimate obstacle, keeping them from achieving their highest potential. The creature in *Frankenstein* is the destructive force that ruins all the good in Frankenstein’s life. He first kills Frankenstein’s younger brother and then continues to kill the rest of Frankenstein’s family and his dearest friends, all as an act of vengeance.

The monster in the text is complicated by Gilbert and Gubar’s angel and monster theory because the monster is a male, but the creature does seduce Frankenstein in a particular way. Frankenstein is seduced by the idea of scientific male creation, by the power this creation would bestow upon him, but he nevertheless has the arrogance to attempt such an endeavor. Because of this desire, this sort of seduction, Frankenstein creates the very source of all of his future misery. He does not reach his full potential as a man because his entire life is killed or ruined by the creature and he therefore dedicates his life to destroying that which he created.
Gilbert and Gubar say “In their attempts at the escape that the female pen offers from the prison of the male text, women . . . begin, as we shall see, by alternately defining themselves as angel women or as monster women” (44). Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is one author who does this in her life as well as in her writing, her novel *Frankenstein*. The women in the novel uphold the angel woman expectations and the monster is the source of evil. By creating the angels alongside the monsters in her text, she is able to write literature that would be considered acceptable and appropriate in terms of the male expectations, but, through Fetterley’s resisting reader technique, readers are able to recognize the submerged text that reveals a feminine experience.
Works Cited


