

The Meaning(s) of *Frankenstein*

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Summary

This article has a twofold intention. On the one hand it aims to recapitulate and evaluate many of the possible meanings ascribed to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. These meanings are seen as complementary and not as comparable on a scale of validity or accuracy. On the other, its target is the process of literary interpretation itself, which is viewed as politically inscribed within the contest of meaning-making that takes place in departments of literary studies. Taking *Frankenstein* as a case study, the article concludes that interpretation is an inevitable language-effect of the situation of the reading subject.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel beoog om twee doeleindes te bereik. Aan die een kant word daar gepoog om heelwat van die moontlike interpretasies van Mary Shelley se *Frankenstein* te hernoem en te evalueer. Hierdie interpretasies word gesien as komplementêrend, en nie as vergelykbaar op 'n skaal van geldigheid of akkuraatheid nie. Aan die ander kant is die artikel se doel ook die proses van interpretasie van die literatuur self; die proses is polities gelaai in die stryd oor betekenisgewing in literatuurdepartemente. *Frankenstein* word gebruik as 'n voorbeeld en die artikel kom tot die slotsom dat interpretasie 'n onvermydelike taaleffek is van die situasie van die leser.

The capacity of *Frankenstein* to give rise to multiple, not necessarily convergent meanings is neatly encapsulated in the fact that there are not one, but two two-sentence commentaries on the novel, both claiming to be definitive. The first, by Chris Baldick, sums up the novel's plot as follows:

- (a) Frankenstein makes a living creature out of bits of corpses.
- (b) The creature turns against him and runs amok.

(1987: 3)

Leonard Wolf offers an equally authoritative, but more interpretive summary of the thematic essentials of the *Frankenstein* story as: "Don't trust science; and, monsters are ugly and mateless" (1992: 182). Clearly, each of these two critics is writing with fidelity to his own critical paradigm, Baldick as a literary scholar who is indebted to formalism, and Wolf as a chronicler of science fiction film. What each stresses in the tale depends on his perspective, intentions and critical situation. The two summaries do not contradict each other, except in terms of their competing claims to authority. Indeed, they can be read as complementary.

In this article I intend to enlarge and elaborate on the above paragraph. I understand Baldick's and Wolf's views of the "essentials" of *Frankenstein*, and the discrepancy between them, as a microcosm of the wider debate surrounding Mary Shelley's novel, which is possessed of a capacity to generate interpretations that can only be called fecund. Paul Sherwin, for instance, gives the following list of interpretations of the monster alone, without considering any other aspects of the text:

If, for the orthodox Freudian, he is a type of the unconscious, for the Jungian he is the shadow, for the Lacanian an *objet a*, for one Romanticist a Blakean

'spectre', for another a Blakean 'emanation'; he also has been or can be read as Rousseau's natural man, a Wordsworthian child of nature, the isolated Romantic rebel, the misunderstood revolutionary impulse, Mary Shelley's abandoned baby self, her abandoned babe, an aberrant signifier, *différance*, or as a hypostasis of godless presumption, the monstrosity of a godless nature, analytical reasoning, or alienating labor.

(1981: 890)

I wish to add to Sherwin's enterprise, by giving a fresh review of several interpretations of *Frankenstein*, at the same time considering the ideological-critical grounds underpinning these views. By these means I intend to arrive obliquely at a consideration of the activity of literary interpretation itself. My generative question is, "What light is shed on the nature and processes of literary interpretation by the co-existence of several (at times) divergent and conflicting interpretations of *Frankenstein*?" My own original reading of the text obviously forms part of the discussion, but it is not my primary aim to arrive at a fresh or comprehensive interpretation. Nor will I comment, except superficially, on the great number of "re-writings" of the *Frankenstein* story.

My reading story begins, in sound New Critical fashion, with the text. Most people, even if they have not read *Frankenstein* in either the original 1818 version or its 1831 revision, "know" or think they know the story told in the novel. It is widely assumed to be about a monster called Frankenstein which runs amok and torments its creator. This view, however, is a (partial) misapprehension of the tale. Victor Frankenstein is the scientist who narrates the story, while his creature is never given a name. Instead, he is relegated – in my own understanding of Kristeva's terms – to the status of a signified without a signifier, and left permanently outside the realm of discourse created by what Kristeva understands as the symbolic order.¹

Looking at *Frankenstein* with the eyes of a theorist working within the paradigm of reception theory,² I might describe my subjective reactions to the text as follows. My first emotion, on reading the final words, was one of sorrow, and the sorrow lingers in re-reading the tale, no matter how familiar or over-interpreted it becomes. This surplus of emotion that escapes and survives the most exhaustive and intellectually satisfying exegesis, is, I suggest, the prime reason for the novel's enduring interest for literary interpretation.

The next stage in the process of constructing an interpretation is to focus, with a view to historical factors, on the discourses that surround the text. Robert Scholes sums up the influence of "context" on an understanding of "text":

Meaning is a continual shuttling back and forth between the language of the work and a network of contexts which are not *in* the work but are essential for its realization.

(1975: 147)

To read the novel in this way, looking for traces of contemporary notions and images, is to assume with Jung that:

Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking. The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial images in the unconscious, which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present.

(1984: 82–3)

In 1790, one year after the French Revolution, in an attempt to describe the new society to which the Revolution had given rise, Edmund Burke wrote:

...Out of the tomb of the murdered monarchy in France has arisen a vast, tremendous unformed spectre, in a far more terrifick guise than any which ever yet have overpowered the imagination, and subdued the fortitude of man.

(1959: 88)

The terms recall *Frankenstein*, and the resemblance becomes even clearer when Burke goes on to liken the social “progeny” of the Revolution to an unnatural child, sure to devour its parents, the radical *philosophes* who had created it. The “monstrous”³ imagery deployed in Burke’s political reflections is only one of many usages of a single discourse. In the same terms, but from the other side of the political fence, Mary Wollstonecraft writes in her *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794), that the luxurious and decadent lifestyle of the French aristocracy have made the nation into “an hideous monster, a devouring beast” (1989: 21). Burke’s and Wollstonecraft’s comments, with their vision of the monstrous side of humanity, are part of the discursive climate, or *parole* in Saussurean terms, which shaped and gave rise to Mary Shelley’s “hideous progeny”,⁴ the novel *Frankenstein*, first published in 1818.

Taking my cue from Scholes’s emphasis on the text’s surrounding discourses, I would argue that *Frankenstein* reflects critically on the dominant literary movement of the era which spawned it, namely Romanticism. One of the hallmarks of Romantic poetry is a depiction of the relationship between the poet and nature as analogous to heterosexual love (Wordsworth’s “The Prelude” and Coleridge’s “Aeolian Harp”, for example, attest to this connection, as do Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy” and Shelley’s “Epipsychidion”). The tragic outcome of Victor’s passionate involvement with nature cautions against an excessive Romantic love of nature which could hubristically usurp the place of family affection. Equally, the monster’s fragmentary origins can be seen to bear affinities with the Romantic questioning of the relationship between parts and the whole they compose, adumbrated by Coleridge in his discussion of Fancy and Imagination in *Biographia Litteraria*.

Significantly, the novel is sub-titled “The Modern Prometheus”, an allusion to the myth of Prometheus, who in trying to help mankind by bestowing fire on them in his capacity as “Prometheus porphyros”, over-reached his capabilities and was accordingly punished by Jove. Victor Frankenstein’s fate can be read as a cautionary tale of a Romantic individualist who, in pursuit of knowledge, goes too far and commits the heresy of challenging God’s pre-eminence as universal soul-maker. Frequent references to *Paradise Lost* drive home the point that Mary Shelley’s text presents a tale of sin and a fall

from innocence. In the monster's identification of himself with Satan, Milton's heroic rebel, can further be read an ironic critique on the Romantic propensity for adulation of Satan without adequate appreciation of his sufferings. In a similar vein, Victor's transgression can be equated with Adam's: he too seeks knowledge which ought to be hidden.

A major aspect of the context of *Frankenstein* is found in a school of literary criticism which is long since outmoded by the "intentional fallacy": namely, the biographical details of the author's life. Mary Shelley was born Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, the daughter of two of the most influential and politically radical thinkers and writers of the day. William Godwin, her father, was the author of the anarchist classic, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1798). By a process of reasoning from logocentric principles alone, Godwin's work reaches the radical conclusion that government is inimical to individual and collective happiness. Godwin's first wife and Mary's⁵ mother was Mary Wollstonecraft, the proto-feminist author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which proposes spiritedly that women should be given equal education and equal rights with men. Wollstonecraft died of puerperal fever eleven days after the birth of her namesake, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (later to become Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley, the wife of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley).

In 1814 Mary eloped with Percy Bysshe Shelley, an adherent of Godwin's political ideas, and in the next year gave birth prematurely to a child who died two weeks later. In March 1815 Mary dreamed of reanimating her dead child by rubbing it before a fire (Baldick 1987: 36), obviously a dream-equivalent of the grief and guilt she felt. In 1816, together with Percy and her half-sister Claire Clairmont, who was pregnant with Byron's child, Mary visited Byron at the Villa Diodati in Geneva. Byron had the attendance of Dr. William Polidori, his personal physician. In the course of a particularly excited evening, during which various Romantic pictures of supernatural eroticism were contemplated, the party agreed to embark on a ghost story contest. *Frankenstein* was the only work to be completed.⁶

Two interpretive strands take Mary's biography as their point of departure. They can loosely be termed "psychoanalytical" and "feminist".⁷ As Peter Brooks notes rather disenchantedly, psychoanalytical criticism traditionally focuses on

...the psychogenesis of the text (the author's unconscious), the dynamics of literary response (the reader's unconscious), or the occult motivations of the characters (postulating an "unconscious" for them).

(1977: 229)

William Veeder (1984), a major exponent of the psychoanalytic approach to *Frankenstein*, reads the novel as a coded reference to the details of Mary's life. Veeder points out that "Victor" was Percy Shelley's early nickname-cum-pen name, and that by inserting his name into the centre of the text, Mary expressed her ambivalent admiration and envy of Percy's creative faculties together with her desire to emulate them. He also notes that Victor Frankenstein's idealized friendship with Henry Clerval is a rose-tinted

representation of Mary's sentimental adulation of Percy. Both Percy and Henry, for example, are sensitive to the charms of the natural world, and Henry provides Victor with a stable point in turmoil (as well as a tour guide), as Percy did for Mary. Similarly, the name of Victor Frankenstein's murdered little brother – William – is the name of Mary's father, her half-brother and her son. Elizabeth, in turn, is the name of Percy's sister and his mother.

While the fairly superficial resemblances between Mary's narrative and her life do indeed give credence to Veeder's interpretive project, I would suggest that it is more fruitful, from a New Critical-cum-psychoanalytical perspective, to explore the implications of a powerful moment in the text: the description of Elizabeth's pose in death.⁸ This bears a striking resemblance to the painting by Henry Fuseli, "The Nightmare", which was contemplated in 1816 by the Byron-Shelley party at the Villa Diodati (Mellor 1988: 121). The passage, like the painting, unites sexual gratification with death in a chilling combination of powerful libidinal forces:

She was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair. Everywhere I turn I see the same figure – her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier.

(1978: 225)

As with most of her sources, though, Mary re-writes the Fuseli picture in terms that extend its sinister, destabilizing import. The suggestion that violent murder also brings erotic fulfilment extends to Victor Frankenstein, who, on hearing Elizabeth scream, "...could feel the blood trickling in my veins and tingling in the extremities of my limbs" and, seeing her dead, "fell senseless on the ground" (1978: 225) in a grotesque parody of sexual arousal and climax. The troubling conclusion suggested here is that Victor who, prior to his marriage, never recorded the slightest flicker of desire for Elizabeth, develops great passion for her as soon as she is dead.

A psychoanalytic reading, especially one that draws on Freudian notions of the repressed, would also note that Victor's sexuality is perverted away from healthy expression in its proper context, namely the family. His quasi-parental bond with the monster has supplanted Elizabeth's pride of place in his affections. Further, all erotic encounters with his cousin are tinged with transgressive (and failed) sexual expression, ranging from incest (she is his cousin, after all) to necrophilia, both in Victor's post-parturition dream where she turns into his dead mother, and in his response to her corpse. A major source for psychoanalytic interpretation is the content of dreams, which are seen to articulate repressed desire. Victor's dream of Elizabeth being transformed into his mother conflates the two most significant women-figures in his life, in a clear indication of his Oedipal erotic desire for his mother. It also articulates a wish to kill Elizabeth. This transgressive and murderous impulse is given generalized form when Victor hacks to pieces the half-formed female monster, thus denying reproductive power to all members of both his unholy and his natural families, except himself. In this light, the monster's

murder of Elizabeth on her wedding-night appears as the simple, even filial obedience of Victor's unspoken and unspeakable desires.

The reciprocal persecution, engaged in by Victor and his creature, testifies to what Franco Moretti calls the "return of the repressed" (1983: 98), the logic which holds that the content of the unconscious, if repressed with sufficient force, surfaces in a new form to plague the unfortunate subject. This is patently true of Frankenstein, whose incarnated unconscious kills all his loved ones.

Victor's capacity for repressed and sexually transgressive desires, suggested in these incidents, implies that the monster is more than Victor's true child, carrying out his father's will; he is his creator's other self, the incarnation of Victor's unconscious mind. Rosemary Jackson (1981) suggests that the defining characteristic of fantasy is its incarnation of the unconscious; and it is not uncommon for Gothic tales to include the figure of the *doppelgänger* or psychological double. Further, Jackson interprets bodily mutilation, a common trope in fantasy, in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis, as the embodiment of a desire to return to the pre-Oedipal stage when the subject perceives his or her own body as an aggregate of disconnected parts or fragments (1981: 89). This critical frame is obviously applicable to the construction of the monster.

Like Veeder, many feminist critics also draw on Mary Shelley's biography in their interpretation of *Frankenstein*, though for more politicized⁹ purposes. However, in keeping with the heterogeneous nature of feminist literary criticism,¹⁰ it offers not one interpretation of *Frankenstein*, but several. When Ellen Moers called the story a "birth myth" (1978: 92), she was the first to use the insights of feminism to point out similarities between the author's anxieties concerning motherhood and those of Victor Frankenstein. There is no doubt that the construction of the monster, in the charnel-houses of Ingolstadt and in the scientist's rooms at night, is an image of artificial gestation, seen through a defamiliarizing perspective. Mary Shelley was the unwitting cause of her creator/mother's death, as is Victor Frankenstein's monster, and there is a sense in which the novel collapses and reformulates what we can surmise were Mary's problems with motherhood. Anne K. Mellor imagines the young woman, whose literary psyche had been agitated by the experience of giving birth to an infant corpse, asking herself questions like the following:

What if my child is born deformed, a freak, a moron, a "hideous" thing? Could I still love it, or would I be horrified and wish it were dead again? What will happen if I can't love my child? Am I capable of raising a healthy, normal child? Will my baby die (as my first baby did)? Could I *wish* my own child to die, to destroy itself? Could I kill it? Could it kill *me* (as I killed my mother, Mary Wollstonecraft)?

(1988: 41)

Mellor's essentially biographical device of speculating about Mary's inner state might be taken further, to generate a further question: "Could giving birth have a detrimental effect on my relationship with my partner (in the

same way as my stillbirth divided me from my beloved Percy)?” This is precisely what happens to Victor: his relationship with Elizabeth decays as he experiences his bond with the monster ever more strongly. Mary Shelley’s understanding of maternal relations, both with her own mother and with her child, must have been troubled, and accordingly, *Frankenstein* presents a vision of birth that is distorted through the lens of psychopathology.

Seen through feminist eyes, it is the scientist (not the creature) who emerges, convincingly, as the novel’s villain. Victor responds to the first sign of life from the creature, who fulfils all his dreams of scientific prowess and is also his exclusive progeny, in terms that resemble but distort the conventional view of parenthood:

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath, his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dim white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.

(1978: 54–55)

Victor flees without a single thought for his “son’s” well-being, and when he wakes later to find the monster staring down at him, smiling and uttering inarticulate sounds of fear and desire (as a pre-lingual baby would), he thrusts him aside and runs out into the street. He explains the change in the creature’s status from his eagerly-awaited creation to detested ogre, by displacing responsibility for his emotions onto the “changeable” nature of human sentiments. But this is not the full story: it seems more likely, as feminist critics such as Anne K. Mellor (1988) and Mary Poovey (1980) have pointed out, that Victor, having usurped the feminine prerogative of reproduction, is unable to deal with the obligations of parenthood.

The misogyny and concomitant usurpation of women’s reproductive privilege that catalyse Victor’s unnatural creation extend to other aspects of *Frankenstein* as well. As Anne Mellor notes (1988: 91), the scientific philosophy propounded by M. Waldman, Victor’s academic mentor at Ingolstadt university, rests on an understanding of nature as feminine, and the scientist as masculine. M. Waldman uses overtly sexual imagery to speak of modern scientists’ investigation of natural phenomena:

They *penetrate* into the *recesses* of nature, and show how *she* works in *her* hiding places.

(1978: 41, my italics)

Victor echoes these terms to describe his own research into nature-as-woman: he grows pale, as befits a lover, and “. . .with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to *her* hiding-places” (1978: 49–50, my italics). In this propensity Victor is the true child of his age, and of the scientific philosophy he espoused. Carolyn Merchant (1980) has shown in *The Death of*

Nature how a Newtonian paradigm necessarily entails seeing the natural world, according to the economy of binary oppositions, instituted by a Cartesian worldview, as all that man is not: inanimate, passive, receptive, feminine.

Victor's opposition to all things feminine goes further than merely a desire to subjugate nature in an imitation of sexual conquest. Mary K. Patterson Thornburg (1987) has shown that Victor sees all women in his life, erroneously, as passive and weak, while Gayatri Spivak (1989) points to Margaret Seville, Walton's sister and the addressee of the whole narrative, as embodying the forces of stability absent from the two scientists Walton and Frankenstein.

The creature's awakening, which inaugurates Frankenstein's rejection of his surrogate child and thus incenses feminist critics, also offers one of the novel's many reversals of sympathy, which cumulate to cast uncertainty on the roles of victim and villain. Critical responses which focus on this aspect of the text tend to deploy either what I call a "thematic" or a deconstructive approach. "Thematic" responses to *Frankenstein* generally perceive the relationship between the scientist and his creature in terms of doubling, or blurring of identity. So many critics emphasize this effect that their interpretation can be seen as normative. Martin Tropp (1976), Masao Miyoshi (1969) and Mary K. Patterson Thornburg (1987) all offer interpretations of the novel derived from this perspective. And, indeed, Victor and his creature do seem to be two halves of a single personality (once the monster learns to speak).

Once complete and at large, the monster is described in terms of negation: the system of binary oppositions so central to deconstructive criticism reveals him as everything that Frankenstein is not. Frankenstein is generous, sensitive, intellectual, while the monster is murderous, callous and grossly physical. The doubling of these terms suggests that the two halves of the relationship each depend on the other for self-definition. This possibility becomes even more credible when, after Victor's death, the monster says he has lost his reason to live. Other hints that the pair are really two divided halves of a single psyche are so numerous that Mary K. Patterson Thornburg speculates that there *is* only one person, the schizophrenic Victor Frankenstein, who cannot allow himself to admit to dreadful deeds and therefore is convinced that his undisciplined unconscious desires have taken on a separate life of their own (1987: 91).

The mutual dependence of Frankenstein and his creature is simultaneously underlined and subverted by the fact that they repeatedly turn into one another. One might reformulate this relationship, with less reliance on illusory notions of "character", in terms which stress the susceptibility of their respective roles and identities to decay. In all his conversations with Victor, the monster is portrayed as eminently more reasonable, partaking more of the nature of the ego – or even the superego – than his creator. When Victor is most agitated by anger or fear, the creature is most rational. The pursuer becomes the pursued in the tale's narrative progression. This propensity for role-reversal is encapsulated in the following interchange, after Victor has

destroyed his half-made female monster. The discourses are so similar that it is difficult to distinguish between the speakers:

“...never will I create another like yourself, equal in deformity and wickedness.”

“Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; – obey!”

(1978: 191)

Deconstruction provides a different perspective, but one which also focuses crucially on the relationship between Victor and his creature. An eminent practitioner of deconstructive criticism, Barbara Johnson (1982), argues that *Frankenstein* was conceived out of Mary Shelley's pen envy (or penis envy, in Freudian terms) of Percy and Byron. In the inverted logic of the author's unconscious, the monster's conception is motivated by Victor Frankenstein's womb envy of women's power to create life through motherhood. And in his anti-parental response to the creature, Victor does indeed become the unnatural and heterogeneous “monster called Frankenstein”, of popular understanding, at the centre of the text.

Barbara Johnson's critical perspective uses a crucial Derridean notion, the idea of the trace, as a deconstructive strategy for explicating the creation of the monster. Abrams defines a trace as

...an elusive aspect of a text which is not, yet functions as though it were; it plays a role without being 'present'; it 'appears/disappears'; 'in presenting itself it effaces itself'.

(1977: 430)

The notion of the trace leads me to discern a nostalgic desire for origins in the image of birth which underlies *Frankenstein*. In this light, the quest of Frankenstein's creature, who himself lacks a birth and thus a real origin, for his parent, can be read as an allegory for the logocentric wish to establish an originary, transcendent meaning. This impulse is central both to much of Western philosophy and the activity of literary interpretation.¹¹

The drive to read centrifugally, from the text to the (social) discourses that surround it, is implicit in deconstructive criticism. But a more forceful expression of this impulse is found in political readings. Although Franco Moretti (1983) draws on psychoanalytical imagery for his analysis of *Frankenstein* in terms of the “return of the repressed”, the main force of his argument is directed to an interpretive paradigm which is almost at the opposite end of the critical spectrum from psychoanalysis: a political reading of the novel. Fredric Jameson makes rather large claims for the centrality of politics in literary interpretation:

[He] conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today – the

psychoanalytic or the mythic, the stylistic, the ethical, the structural – but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation.

(1982: 17)

Moretti takes up Jameson's challenge to the literary critic to be socially responsible and offers (to my knowledge) the only Marxist reading of *Frankenstein* when he sees the monster as a figure for the emerging proletariat. He writes:

Like the proletariat, the monster is denied a name and an individuality. He is the Frankenstein monster; he belongs wholly to his creator (just as one can speak of a "Ford worker"). Like the proletariat, he is a *collective* and *artificial* creature.

(1983: 85, my italics)

Moretti also draws attention to racist elements in Victor's perception of the monster as unaesthetic because his appearance is different from that of the master race of the English bourgeoisie. His skin is yellow (not white and pink); his lips are black and straight, not red and full; and he is too tall to belong to the same race as his creator and pseudo-father. This predilection is particularly evident when Victor decides to abandon the creation of a mate for the monster, because he is haunted by thoughts that ". . . a *race of devils* would be propagated upon the earth who might make the very existence of the *species of man* a condition precarious and full of terror" (1978: 189, my italics). Gayatri Spivak (1989: 211) also focuses on the political resonances of *Frankenstein* (but uses the emphases of postcolonial studies) when she sees Victor and the monster as analogues to Ariel and Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

A Marxist reading of a text published in 1818, when the proletariat was not properly constituted, may be anachronistic. However, this is not to discount its social aspects completely. *Frankenstein* does embody a powerful ideology celebrating the primacy of the family,¹² and at the same time condemning social injustice. A sentimentalized vision of family relations is at the heart of the novel: both Victor and the monster describe a specific family as the repository of all emotional gratification. Victor sees his own family in terms which admit no criticism of their untarnished mutual love and loyalty; the monster aspires passionately to be a member of the De Lacey family. Mary Shelley's promotion of the nuclear family as constitutive of society recalls Wordsworth's exalting of the "domestic affections" in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and thus registers a common Romantic view. But her text goes further, by censuring those who shirk their obligations to the family in order to pursue their own projects. In this regard, Alphonse Frankenstein is Victor's father in more than blood; he also articulates the Law of the Father, or social prescription, when he tells his son:

You must pardon me if I regard any interruption in your correspondence as a proof that your other duties are equally neglected.

(1978: 51)

In a similarly didactic vein, the plot of *Frankenstein* may be seen to embody a moral message. The arctic explorer Robert Walton and the heretical

scientist Victor Frankenstein have both denied the claims of their family to seek knowledge in solitude; but what they have found instead is the knowledge of solitude, the bitter pangs of loneliness which they share with the monster. Walton longs for a sympathetic listener, but is threatened by the mutiny of his crew; and Victor is forced to watch as, one by one, his most cherished relationships are shattered. In place of his natural family, and at their expense, Victor has created an unnatural family where he is both father and mother, while his "son" can never attain sexual maturity.

The patriarchal order represented by the family is so clear, and so restrictive, in *Frankenstein* that this aspect of the text must be seen as conservative. By contrast, it condemns social injustice with a reforming zeal that calls for the removal of all inequities. The travesty of justice in the trials of Justine Moritz for the murder of William Frankenstein, and of Victor for the murder of Henry Clerval, is intended to provoke the reader to outrage. More pervasive, however, is the injustice visited by Victor Frankenstein on the monster, whose claims on his help he refutes repeatedly. The trope of the monster suffering for Victor's crimes pervades his story. The tale begins with his rejection at the hands of men on the grounds that he is too hideous for human sight, and it ends only with his projected suicide, which seems gratuitous, if not tragic, in the face of the good intentions which attended his construction. Repeatedly in *Frankenstein*, members of the deprived classes are punished for crimes committed by their superiors, in a comprehensive critique of a society founded on inequality. This aspect of the novel appealed most to Percy Shelley, whose anonymous review summed up its moral as: "Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked" (1888: 418).

In keeping with other moralistic aspects of *Frankenstein*, the futile suffering and death of its eponymous hero probably embody a lesson concerning the will to knowledge (a close relation of the will to power) run rampant and pursued out of its proper social context. This leads to a consideration of the scientific content of the novel, which I have addressed rather obliquely when dealing with feminist responses. A reading of this aspect of the text must acknowledge that the narrative is not anti-technological, as a superficial consideration of the monster as an artefact might seem to indicate. Rather, it has been interpreted by Martin Tropp (1976) and Levine and Knoepfelmacher (1979) as the prototypical science fiction novel. The proper domain of science fiction is, of course, scientific premise; and however far-fetched the notion of reanimating corpses may seem to be in the twentieth century, it was a possibility at the leading edge of science in Mary Shelley's day, as Vasbinder (1984) has shown. The idea of disobedient artifacts pervades modern science fiction and can be seen, for example, in Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where the computer, called Hal, defies its creators. While these images serve as tropes for current fears of technology, it would be anachronistic to ascribe such phobias to Mary Shelley, and these meanings and the re-writings articulating them belong to the present-day periphery of the tale.

I contend that the textual energies of *Frankenstein* go beyond psychoanalytical and religious discourse, to offer a metatheoretical commentary on these discourses. Victor's tendency to metamorphose into his own uncon-

scious, and to summon it at will (the creature appears whenever Victor thinks of him) gives the text an element of trenchantly subversive critique of the discourse of psychoanalysis, which deals with notions of fixed subjectivity and roles within the psyche. On a philosophical plane, this instability begs the question of what defines the ontological category of the human. The monster cannot be human since he does not share human origins. On the other hand, his ability to evoke sympathy for his human plight, his mastery of language (an exclusively human skill) and his very human need for companionship and emotional gratification through social intercourse, invite the reader to identify with him. Often he seems more attractively human than his creator, and this, I believe, poses the novel's most insistent and transgressive critique of hegemonic ideology.

The interpretations of *Frankenstein* – even those I have briefly mentioned in this paper – are so numerous, and its influences so widespread, that, I think, categorizing it as a myth is indisputable, even if myth is understood in its narrowest anthropological sense, as a story of origins. My own sense of myth, though, is far wider. Following Joseph Campbell (1976: 4–8) and in direct opposition to Darko Suvin, who claims that stasis is the defining quality of myth (1979: 24), I see it as essentially dynamic, creative, and open to multiple transformations under the influence of cultural forces. In this sense, clearly, the story of *Frankenstein* is a myth; indeed, its very heterogeneity makes it the occasion of a seemingly endless profusion of revisions and re-writings.

As I have shown, *Frankenstein* poses a dizzyingly wide range of opportunities for explication and interpretation. I suggest that the reason for these divergent interpretations lies in the condition of being human and a reader (in a university English department). Reading is motivated by curiosity and the impulse to find answers, however partial and determined by the reader's historical situation. An indivisible part of the pleasure of *Frankenstein* as a text, to which the plethora of meanings I have listed here attests, is, indeed, its susceptibility to interpretation. Ricoeur links the subject's curiosity about the self to curiosity about the text when he writes:

I say that interpretation is the process by which the disclosure of *new modes of being* – or, if you prefer Wittgenstein to Heidegger, of *new forms of life* – gives to the subject a new capacity of knowing himself.

(Valdes 1991: 316)

Viewed in this light, the puzzle-solving, meaning-making activities of literary criticism and literary composition are simply different modes of knowing oneself as a reading and, therefore, interpreting subject. That *Frankenstein* can be interpreted, seemingly endlessly, points as surely to the faculty of human creativity as the fact that it was written at all.

Notes

1. In *A Kristeva Reader* Kristeva describes the process by which the subject is inserted simultaneously into language and into the codes of social conformity.

- Both meanings are covered by the term 'symbolic order' (Kristeva 1986: 199–200).
2. Norman Holland exemplifies such a reader-centred approach in his work, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (1968).
 3. The concept of the monster occupies a central place in any understanding of *Frankenstein*. As Chris Baldick points out, the term did not have its current connotations of hideousness and misshapeness at the time Mary Shelley used it to describe Victor Frankenstein's creation. Rather, the word "monster" was still imbued with the Shakespearean meaning of a demonstration of moral principles together with the sense of physical heterogeneity or misfit (Baldick 1987: 12–18).
 4. Mary Shelley used this term to describe *Frankenstein* in her Preface to the 1831 edition of the text (Mellor 1988: 52).
 5. I recognize, with William Veeder (1984: xii), the difficulty of distinguishing between two eminent writers whose surname is Shelley while according equal stature to both. Accordingly, I have adopted the practice of referring to them as "Mary" and "Percy" (Shelley) respectively.
 6. The biographical details of Mary Shelley's life have been gleaned from Baldick (1987), St. Clair (1989) and Mellor (1988).
 7. Although literary interpretations draw on schools of literary criticism and theory, they tend to overlap and shade into one another so that a clear distinction between "categories" of interpretations is very difficult to achieve. Distinctions such as I have attempted in this essay must, accordingly, be seen as provisional.
 8. While Veeder notes the contribution made by the Fuseli picture to *Frankenstein*, he does not give more than a passing mention to it (1984: 85).
 9. I am using "political" in its feminist sense here, to signify the power struggle between the genders.
 10. See, for example, Warhol (1991), Eagleton (1986) and Belsey & Moore (1989), all of which describe the range of feminist positions along a continuum of interpretation.
 11. I am indebted to my colleague, Karen Scherzinger, for this line of argument.
 12. Mary Poovey (1984) has drawn attention to the central role of the nuclear family as constitutive of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British society, and especially to women's economic dependence on it.

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