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Author(s): M. A. Goldberg
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Moral and Myth in Mrs. Shelley's *Frankenstein*

By M. A. Goldberg

I

In the central pages of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus* the reader encounters for some six chapters a personal narrative of the monster. For the first time since his creation, he is approaching his maker who sits sad and pensive near the awful majesty of Mont Blanc. Conscious of his "duties as a creator towards his creature," Frankenstein agrees to listen to the tale of this blighted being who has developed from a *tabula rasa,* experiencing in true Lockean fashion first confused, then distinct sensations, and developing in turn social affections, then moral and intellectual judgments. Crucial to his learning, we discover, has been a leather portmanteau, found one day in the forest where he has hidden himself from the eyes of mankind, and in which are contained, together with some articles of dress, a volume of Plutarch's *Lives,* the *Sorrows of Werter,* and Milton's *Paradise Lost.* The latter, he explains, has had a most profound effect upon him:

> I read it [*Paradise Lost*], as I had read the other volumes which had fallen into my hands, as a true history. . . . I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from, beings of a superior nature: but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.[1]

This is no idle image which the creature evokes here, comparing his own situation with Satan's, and with Adam's paradisaic state in Eden. The confusion apparent in his own consciousness—whether he is an

1. Mary W. Shelley, *Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus* (London, 1922), pp. 135-136. Subsequent references in the essay allude to this Everyman edition.

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Adam, destined ultimately for eternal grace, or a Satan, doomed to eternal darkness—is a motif crucial to the entire novel. It is crucial to the monster's tale, embedded as the innermost circle of the text. It is crucial to Frankenstein's narrative, which, unfolded to Captain Walton, encircles the monster's tale like the middle ring of a vast inferno. And it is crucial to Walton's letters, which hover about the outermost fringes of these depths. Indeed, these three circles—their relationship to one another and to the Miltonic motif—form the basic structure of the novel, a structure from which Mrs. Shelley has spun a moral web, with consistency and with precision.

Partially responsible for the view that *Frankenstein* is merely a "ghost story" is Mrs. Shelley's own preface to the 1831 edition, which explains how she, Shelley, Byron, and the physician Polidori each agreed one June evening in 1816 to write a tale of horror. Hers, she writes, was to be "one which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart."

The novelist's appeal to horror and terror was certainly indicative of no new trend for the early nineteenth century. Almost a hundred years before, Addison had propounded the Great and Uncommon as the most fertile sources for pleasures of the imagination, and by mid-century this had been expanded into a whole esthetic, with Edmund Burke contending that the excitation of terror and pain, the true source of sublimity, produces the strongest emotion man is capable of feeling. Yet, unlike modern exponents of horror who revel in the hedonism of violence, the writers who worked within this new esthetic—Lewis in *The Monk,* Mrs. Radcliffe in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*—were never devoid of the moral fabric so crucial to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. Though the moralizing was generally crude and obvious, superimposed upon the structure to meet the demands of the public, nevertheless it was consistently present. Even in Burke, where passions have clearly surmounted the newly dethroned reason as the source of art and reality, pleasure in terror bears ethical and social implications. "The delight we have in such things," explains the author of *On the Sublime and Beautiful,* "hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel, prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer."[2] Morality in Burke, as with the writers who followed in his wake, is never absent. For Burke, it has simply become instinctive, a branch of the pleasure-pain principle and antecedent to that mainstay of the preceding age, the power of reason.

Unless we allow ourselves to be misled by the intentions revealed in

2. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* ed. J. T. Boulton (New York, 1958), Pt. I, Sect. XIV, p. 46.

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Mrs. Shelley's preface, written for a later edition only at the request of her publishers, it is in the light of this esthetic that *Frankenstein* must be viewed. To examine the novel for the terror it evokes, without perceiving its relationship to the moral context of early nineteenth-century England, is, in reality, to distort the essence of the tale.

II

We encounter the first indications of this moral context in the letters of Captain Walton, who has been inspired since early youth to satiate an ardent curiosity about the unknown regions of the earth. Glowing with an enthusiasm which has elevated him to "heaven," Walton lives in "a Paradise" of his own creation. His opening letters from St. Petersberg and Archangel (the place-names are scarcely fortuitous!) anticipate the glory and knowledge that await him, once he penetrates the deeper mysteries of the earth in the northern-most regions of "eternal light," where "the sun is forever visible." His monomania has utterly consumed him, but Walton concedes that no price is too large "to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought; for the dominion I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race."

One major failing seems to threaten Walton's relentless pursuit: the lack of compassionate society, "intimate sympathy with a fellow mind." Significantly, Walton regards this want as "a most severe evil" and he readily acknowledges that "a man could boast of little happiness, who did not enjoy this blessing."

Once he encounters Victor Frankenstein amid the ice floes of the north, this conflict—between his thirst for knowledge which increasingly carries him away from society and a thirst for social love which is frustrated by this pursuit of knowledge—appears happily reconciled. His newly-found friend reminds him, however, "You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did," and hopes that Walton's temptation "may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been." In order that Walton might "deduce an apt moral" from his own experience, Frankenstein consents to disclose the secret of his life.

Frankenstein's tale, forming the middle circle of the novel, is clearly intended, then, as an *exemplum,* aimed at weaning the captain from his obsession. Just as Walton's opening letters sound this didactic note, so do his closing epistles. "Learn my miseries, and do not seek to increase your own," Walton is cautioned at the close of Frankenstein's narrative, just as he has been previously warned: "Learn from me, if not from my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge." Apparently Walton does learn from the miseries of his dying friend, who has already partaken of the bitter apple, for once his

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mariners approach, urging him to abandon his rash scheme that can lead only to death, the captain relents, agreeing to return to England, where they may once again encounter fellow-feeling in a sympathetic and compassionate society.

An examination of Frankenstein's central narrative reveals that this opening motif, the temptation of knowledge and the punishment of estrangement, is echoed with consistency and clarity.

From the beginning Frankenstein is "deeply smitten with the thirst for knowledge." He too is tempted by the forbidden fruit, and his earliest sensations are "curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature." For him "the world was . . . a secret which I desired to divine," and even in his youth his "inquiries were directed to the metaphysical, or, in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world." Like Eve and her precursor, Satan, Frankenstein is tempted by "the secrets of heaven and earth." Immersing himself in the works of Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus, he is soon consumed by a "passion, which afterwards ruled my destiny." His studies at Ingolstadt leave him more than ever determined to "pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" (pages 27-40).

Convinced that a new species would bless him as its creator, he begins work upon a project to break through the bounds of life and death by animating lifeless matter. But the same curse that was to beset Walton begins to assert itself. Laboring in a solitary chamber, insensible to the sympathies of nature and friendship, he is conscious of having "to procrastinate all that related to my feelings of affection until the great object, which swallowed up every habit of my nature, should be completed." Before too long, he confesses, "I shunned my fellow-creatures as if I had been guilty of a crime" (pages 48-50). Like Walton, whose intellectual pursuits were to isolate him from mankind, Frankenstein discovers that "study . . . secluded me from the intercourse of my fellow-creatures, and rendered me unsocial" (page 66).

Two years of impassioned labor culminate in success. Like Prometheus—whom Apollodorus describes as having first created man out of clay, then instilled into his bosom a sacred spark of fire, stolen from the heavens—Frankenstein, his nineteenth-century disciple, succeeds in infusing " a spark of being into the lifeless being" that lies before him in his laboratory (page 51). What is glory for the omnipotent deity of *Genesis* or the Babylonian god Bel, for the Egyptian father-of-gods Khnoumou or the Australian creator Pund-jel, is for lesser gods, like Frankenstein, the "modern Prometheus," a crime. The apple of knowledge bears within it the acrid seeds of punishment. As with Satan and Beëlzebub, this passion to usurp divine prerogatives casts the new

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creator into a burning cauldron of his own making. He "who, but a few years ago, believed in Cornelius Agrippa as firmly as in the gospel" (page 64) now finds his dream become a "hell" (page 53). His labors have already denied him the sympathies of society in general; now, the monster succeeds in depriving him, one by one, of those whom he loves most dearly: first, his brother William, then innocent Justine, his benevolent father, his friend Clerval, and finally that "living spirit of love" (page 29), his betrothed Elizabeth. At times he curses his creation as an abhorred "devil," a "fiend," a "daemon." But simultaneously he recognizes that those who have died are "hapless victims to my unhallowed arts" and the "result of my curiosity and lawless devices" (pages 80, 89). To Captain Walton, who appears to be following his own hell-bent footsteps, he makes this confession:

> . . . My heart overflowed with kindness, and the love of virtue. I had begun life with benevolent intentions, and thirsted for the moment when I should put them in practice, and make myself useful to my fellow-beings. Now all was blasted: instead of that serenity of conscience, which allowed me to look back upon the past with self-satisfaction, and from thence to gather promise of new hopes, I was seized by remorse and the sense of guilt, which hurried me away to a hell of intense tortures, such as no language can describe. . . . I shunned the face of man; all sound of joy or complacency was torture to me; solitude was my only consolation—deep, dark, deathlike solitude.
>
> (page 90)

Like Coleridge's guilt-ridden mariner, Frankenstein has a deadly weight hanging round his neck, bowing him to the ground (page 161).[3] His father had wished him "to seek amusement in society [but] I abhorred the face of man," Frankenstein admits. "I felt that I had no right to share their intercourse." Now, he reveals only the "desire to avoid society" and fly "to solitude, from the society of every creature" (pages 199-202). He is "immersed in solitude," for he perceives "an insurmountable barrier" between him and his fellow-man. "I felt as if I had committed some great crime, the consciousness of which haunted me. I was guiltless, but I had indeed drawn down a horrible curse upon my head, as mortal as that of crime" (pages 168-173), he confesses. Though his inner-being longs for the compassion and sympathy that society affords, his guilt has already driven him out of love's garden. He dares not even whisper "paradisiacal dreams of love and joy" to Eliza-

3. Reinforcing the Miltonic and Promethean theme are allusions to Coleridge's ancient mariner, which are scattered throughout the novel. Walton compares himself with the mariner but assures his sister that he will kill no albatross, though he is heading for "the land of mist and snow" (p. 10). In his pursuit of the monster Frankenstein is "Like one who, on a lonely road, / Doth walk in fear and dread" (p. 53).

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beth, for, as he readily concedes, "the apple was already eaten, and the angel's arm bared to drive me from all hope" (pages 203-204).

Estranged from all he has held dear, conscious only of loneliness and guilt, Frankenstein calls upon the spirits of night and death, those wandering ministers of vengeance, to aid him in pursuing "the daemon who caused this misery until he or I shall perish in mortal conflict. . . . Let the cursed and hellish monster drink deep of agony; let him feel the despair that now torments me." The same monomania displayed in creating the being is now passionately hurled into its destruction. "Cursed by some devil," embracing his "eternal hell" (pages 219-220), Frankenstein pursues his daemon into the wastes of the north country. Here, in his final hours of life, he confesses to Robert Walton the sin he shares with Milton's archangel:

> All my speculations and hopes are as nothing; and, like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell. . . . I conceived the idea and executed the creation of a man. Even now I cannot recollect without passion my reveries while the work was incomplete. I trod heaven in my thoughts, now exulting in my powers, now burning with the idea of their effects. From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and a lofty ambition; but how am I sunk! (page 229)

III

Although parallels between the temptations of Frankenstein or Walton and those of Adam or Satan are clearly delineated, it would be a grave distortion to force the analogy without noting pertinent differences. Milton's is a seventeenth-century reinterpretation of the Fall described by the Jehovistic writer of *Genesis;* but Milton's narrative also parallels to no small degree the Hellenic myth of Prometheus who, having usurped the powers of the higher gods, is alienated forever from both men and gods, and chained to the frozen top of the Caucasus. This is an allusion of which Mrs. Shelley was certainly conscious, since she refers to Frankenstein as a "Modern Prometheus" in her sub-title. Also, Shelley himself was obviously aware of the structural similarity between Milton's narrative and the Greek myth, for in his preface to *Prometheus Unbound* he remarks that "the only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus, is Satan." Parallels for Mrs. Shelley's handling of the guilt-theme, however, can also be found in Dostoyevsky and Kafka, or in Jung who suggests that "every step towards greater consciousness is a kind of Promethean guilt: through knowledge, the gods are as it were robbed of their fire, that is, something that was the property of the unconscious powers is torn out of its natural context and subordinated to the whims of the conscious mind."[4]

4. Carl G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology,* in *The Collected Works,* tr. by R. F. C. Hull (London, 1953), VII, 154 n.

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But Frankenstein's guilt is not the psychological and mystic soul-searching of Kafka or Dostoyevsky, just as it is never completely the crime of *hubris* manifested in Aeschylus or the failure to recognize derivation which we discern in Milton. Frankenstein's crime, like Walton's, is social. Both sin against society. In syncretizing the Miltonic and Promethean motif Mrs. Shelley has clearly translated her materials into early nineteenth-century terms, just as Keats revised the myth of Endymion, and as Shelley transformed the story of Prometheus within his own contemporary framework.

Walton and Frankenstein both sin, not against self or God, but against the moral and social order. Though both begin their pursuit with benevolent intentions, each discovers his error in assuming that knowledge is a higher good than love or sympathy, and that it can be independent of the fellow-feeling afforded by a compassionate society. As a result, what had appeared initially as a benevolent intention becomes in the final analysis misguided pride, a selfish pursuit aimed at self-glory, because it evades the fulfillment of higher duties toward the social community, the brotherhood of man which forms the highest good. Understandably, then, Mrs. Shelley's book is paralleled most significantly, not by Aeschylus or Milton, but by her own contemporaries. In Byron's *Manfred,* for example, an analogous "quest of hidden knowledge" leads the hero increasingly toward a "solitude . . . peopled with the Furies." Manfred's avowed flaw ("though I wore the form, / I had no sympathy with breathing flesh") rises from the same ethical assumptions implicit in the guilt-ridden consciousness of Victor Frankenstein. Similarly, Shelley's prefatory remarks on *Alastor or, The Spirit of Solitude* indicate that "the Poet's self-centred seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin." Shelley's supposition, that "the intellectual faculties, the imagination, the functions of sense, have their respective requisitions on the sympathy of corresponding powers in other human beings," is obviously engendered from the same general principle which has ordered the materials of *Frankenstein.*[5]

Mrs. Shelley offers in her novel—as does Byron in *Manfred* and Shelley in *Alastor*—a theme which is clearly in the tradition of Cudworth and Price, the seventeenth-century Platonists. This is a conception inherited in the eighteenth century by Shaftesbury and Hutcheson; later, by the Scottish Common-Sense School, as represented by Adam Smith; and finally by William Godwin, who had assumed as basic to his doctrine of political justice that virtue is essentially social. Insistent that reason and free will, as developed in an enlightened society, would

5. *The Works of Lord Byron,* ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London, 1901), IV, 104-106. *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck (New York, 1926-29), I, 173—hereafter cited as Shelley.

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naturally result in the subordination of individual pleasures for the good of society as a whole, Godwin set himself in opposition to La Rochefoucauld, Hobbes, and Mandeville, for whom man was basically selfish and non-social, and to Rousseau, who had seen society as a force destructive to natural benevolence. "No being can be either virtuous, or vicious, who has no opportunity of influencing the happiness of others," Godwin had contended in his *Enquiry concerning Political Justice,* insistent that "the true solitaire cannot be considered as a moral being. . . . His conduct is vicious, because it has a tendency to render him miserable." Explaining that "virtue consists in a desire of the happiness of the species. . . . It must begin with a collective idea of the human species," Godwin argues that true knowledge is also dependent upon the social structure. "Even knowledge, and the enlargement of intellect, are poor, when unmixed with sentiments of benevolence and sympathy," he points out; ". . . and science and abstraction will soon become cold, unless they derive new attractions from ideas of society."[6]

Similarly, Thomas Paine develops the relationship between happiness and social virtues in *The Rights of Man.* Since nature created man for social life, Paine writes, "no one man is capable, without the aid of society, of supplying his own wants; and those wants, acting upon every individual, impel the whole of them into society, as naturally as gravitation acts to a centre." Nature has gone even further than this, Paine continues. "She has implanted in him a system of social affections, which, though not necessary to his existence, are essential to his happiness. There is no period in life when this love of society ceases to act. It begins and ends with our being."[7]

This same concept, so crucial to Godwin and Paine, is also central to Shelley's thought. "Love is celebrated every where as the sole law which should govern the moral world," he announces in his preface to *The Revolt of Islam,* and in an early essay "On Love" he explains that "in solitude, or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings, and yet they sympathise not with us, we love the flowers, the grass, and the waters, and the sky. . . . So soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was." The closing paragraph of Shelley's preface to *Alastor* unmistakably extends this idea:

They who . . . keep aloof from sympathies with their kind . . . languish, because none feel with them their common nature. They are morally dead. . . . Among those who attempt to exist without human sympathy, the pure

6. William Godwin, *Enquiry concerning Political Justice,* ed. F. E. L. Priestley (Toronto, 1946), I, 317, 311; II, 325-326. See also I, 461, where Godwin insists that "Real knowledge is benevolent, not cruel and retaliating."

7. Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (New York, 1951), pp. 157-158.

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and tender-hearted perish through the intensity and passion of their search after its communities, when the vacancy of their spirit suddenly makes itself felt. All else, selfish, blind, and torpid, are those unforeseeing multitudes who constitute, together with their own, the lasting misery and loneliness of the world. Those who love not their fellow-beings, live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave.

Together with the essay "On Love" and the preface to *Alastor,* Shelley's theories in *Speculation on Morals* can easily serve as a commentary on the thematic development in *Frankenstein:*

Selfishness is . . . the offspring of ignorance and mistake; it is the portion of unreflecting infancy, and savage solitude, or of those whom toil or evil occupations have [blunted or rendered torpid;] disinterested benevolence is the product of a cultivated imagination, and has an intimate connexion with all the arts which add ornament, or dignity, or power, or stability to the social state of man. Virtue is thus entirely a refinement of civilised life; a creation of the human mind or rather a combination which it has made, . . . of the feelings suggested by the relations established between man and man.[8]

Through Mrs. Shelley's journal entries we know that during 1816-1817, when *Frankenstein* was conceived, she and Shelley discussed the work many times. We know, too, through the *Journal,* that in these years she and Shelley both read Milton's *Paradise Lost,* and that Shelley was immersed at this same time in Godwin's *Political Justice* and Paine's *The Rights of Man,* as well as in the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus. I do not mean to imply that Mary Shelley borrowed her social and moral conceptions from Paine, or from Shelley or Godwin, then deliberately embodied them within her mythological framework. It is perfectly understandable that she shared the social thought of her father and her husband, and that she wove these ideas, which were shared also by many of the enlightened English public during those decades, into an esthetic pattern of her own making.

The consistency of her social and moral theme is certainly nowhere more apparent than in the narrative of the monster, whose experience forms an essential parallel with that of Frankenstein and Walton. Like the latter, whose original intentions were directed at benevolence and sympathy, the creature initially bears the seeds of virtue. The sympathies of Walton and Frankenstein have been rendered torpid by their monomaniacal pursuit of knowledge which removes them increasingly from a compassionate society; similarly, the creature discovers that his sympathies are perpetually blunted by the misery of loneliness and isolation, estranged as he must be from human kind. At first, he views "crime as a distant evil; benevolence and generosity were ever present"

8. Shelley, I, 247; VI, 202; I, 174; VII, 76.

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in the persons of the DeLaceys, behind whose cottage he has hidden. "My heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures: to see their sweet looks directed towards me with affection was the utmost limit of my ambition," he confesses. His readings only reinforce this natural propensity for social love, so that before long he feels "the greatest ardour for virtue . . . and abhorrence for vice" (pages 133-138).

Like his maker, and like Captain Walton, the creature soon comes to realize that "sorrow only increased with knowledge" (page 125), for the more he learns about the nature of good and its dependence upon social intercourse, the more he recognizes the impossibility of immersing himself in it. "Increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was," he announces. At times he allows his thoughts to ramble in "the fields of Paradise," where sympathy and benevolence hold forth; but always there is the rude awakening to learn "it was all a dream; no Eve soothed my sorrows, nor shared my thoughts; I was alone." Aware that even "Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and abhorred" (pages 136-137), the creature must acknowledge with bitterness, "I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel" (page 101).

Alternating between the role of Adam and Satan, hoping he might still be lifted to the glories of love and sympathy, but fearing that he might be forced into the depths of malevolence and depravity because of his isolation, the creature soon finds his fate determined, once the DeLaceys reject his friendly advances, just as all mankind has rejected him beforehand. "From that moment I declared everlasting war against the species," he admits. "I, like the arch-fiend, bore a hell within me; and, finding myself unsympathized with, wished to . . . spread havoc and destruction" (page 143). Natural proclivities toward virtue compel the creature to approach his maker and urge him to create a mate "with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. . . . I am malicious because I am miserable," he explains, as he begs for the happiness which is his right. "Let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request" (pages 153-154). With an understanding strikingly analogous to that revealed in Godwin, Shelley, Byron, and Paine, the monster describes his moral state:

> If I have no ties and no affections, hatred and vice must be my portion; the love of another will destroy the cause of my crimes, and I shall become a thing of whose existence every one will be ignorant. My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which I am now excluded. (page 156)

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His joy knows no bounds, when Frankenstein, persuaded by the monster's Godwinian reasoning and prompted by his own sense of justice, agrees to undertake the project of creating a mate. Immersed once more in the solitude requisite for the formation of another being, however, Frankenstein comes to recognize for the first time the selfishness of his labors which, making possible the propagation of a race of devils, might eventually threaten the existence of the entire human race. Because this second project is abandoned, the monster proceeds to unleash all his hatred and fury, while depriving his maker of the love and sympathy which he himself has been denied.

After an awesome pursuit into the isolated regions of the north—a pursuit which culminates in Frankenstein's death—the monster offers his final confidence to Walton: "My heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy; and when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred it did not endure the violence of the change without torture such as you cannot even imagine." Though Walton is quick to condemn him for his crimes, the creature reminds him of the greater crime perpetrated against him. "No sympathy may I ever find. When I first sought it, it was the love of virtue, the feelings of happiness and affection with which my whole being overflowed," he cries out. "When I run over the frightful catalogue of my sins, I cannot believe that I am the same creature whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness. But it is even so; the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil. Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am alone" (pages 238-240).

In an 1817 review which has generally been ignored, Shelley draws some interesting parallels between Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and *Frankenstein,* and summarizes thematic development in Mary Shelley's book with penetrating incisiveness:

> . . . The crimes and malevolence of the single Being, though indeed withering and tremendous, [are not] the offspring of any unaccountable propensity to evil, but flow irresistibly from certain causes fully adequate to their production. They are the children, as it were, of Necessity and Human Nature. In this the direct moral of the book consists. . . . Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked. Requite affection with scorn;—let one being be selected, for whatever cause, as the refuse of his kind—divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations—malevolence and selfishness. It is thus that, too often in society, those who are best qualified to be its benefactors and its ornaments, are branded by some accident with scorn, and changed, by neglect and solitude of heart, into a scourge and a curse.[9]

9. Shelley, VI, 264.

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The distinction which Shelley draws here between an "unaccountable propensity to evil" and that necessitated by external social forces which isolate the individual, thus causing selfishness and malevolence, points indeed to the "direct moral of the book." Although a recent biographer, noting this theme of estrangement throughout Mrs. Shelley's novels, interprets this as the author's "symbol of her own loneliness,"[10] it is apparent in any close examination of the text that "loneliness" assumes its fullest meaning relative only to the social and moral context of early nineteenth-century England. This is the context of Godwin and Paine, as well as Byron and Shelley, and certainly the context of the woman who came to be known as "the author of *Frankenstein.*"

Antioch College

10. Elizabeth Nitchie, *Mary Shelley* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1953), pp. 14-21.

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