**The Misunderstood Monster | Joseph Pearce | From the Introduction to Mary Shelley's**[***Frankenstein***](http://www.ignatius.com/ViewProduct.aspx?SID=1&Product_ID=3290&AFID=12&)**(Ignatius Critical Editions, 2008)**

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Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is one of the most influential novels of the nineteenth century; it is also one of the most misunderstood and abused. In recent years, it has been vivisected critically by latter-day Victor Frankensteins, who have transformed the meanings emergent from the novel into monsters of their own contorted imaginations. Most particularly, Franken-feminists have turned the novel into a monster of misanthropy. Seldom has a work of fiction suffered so scandalously from the slings and arrows of outrageous criticism.

Much of the problem in understanding the novel derives from the conflicting forces at work in its pages, forces that were a whirlwind of warring influences in the mind and heart of its teenage author. On a purely emotional level, the young Mary Shelley was surrounded by tragedy, including the death in early infancy of her first child and the suicide of two intimate relations. She was also battling with the monsters of modernity and struggling with the atheistic philosophy of her father and the iconoclastic musings of her lover. Within the pages of Frankenstein we see the savagery of Rousseau, the pseudosatanic manipulation of Milton, the Romantic reaction against the "dark satanic mills" of science and industrialism, the conflict between the "light" Romanticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge and the "darker" Romanticism of Byron and Shelley, and, perhaps most enigmatically, the struggle between the two Shelleys themselves, and perhaps the emergence of Mary from Percy's shadow.

Since the personhood of Mary Shelley is daubed across the pages of *Frankenstein* in gaudy shades of angst-driven self-expression, it is crucial to understand something about the author before we can begin to get to grips with the work. In the preface to the Norton Critical Edition of *Frankenstein*, J. Paul Hunter describes Mary as being "irritated by the torments of conventional family values". [1] Such an assessment is singularly odd considering that Mary had no experience of "conventional family values"--her own family and her own upbringing being anything but conventional. Her father, William Godwin, was a proponent of atheism and an advocate of the dissolution of the institution of marriage, describing marriage as "the worst of all laws"; her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, a protofeminist, died from childbirth complications eleven days after Mary's birth on August 30, 1797. In 1801 Mary's father remarried. Thereafter, the "family" in which Mary grew up consisted of her father, her stepmother, a stepbrother and a stepsister, and a half sister, Fanny Imlay, the daughter of her mother by Gilbert Imlay. *Pace* Hunter, any "torments" suffered by Mary Shelley must be laid at the door of her very unconventional family background.

In November 1812, Mary, then fifteen years old, met Percy Bysshe Shelley for the first time. He was with Harriet Westbrook, whom he had just married. In July 1814 Percy Shelley deserted his pregnant wife and one-year-old child and fled to the Continent with the sixteen-year-old Mary, who was also pregnant. In November Harriet Shelley gave birth to her second child; in the following February Mary gave birth, prematurely, to a daughter who died within a few days. Almost a year later, in January 1816, Mary gave birth to a son, William.

In the summer of 1816, Mary and Percy visited Lord Byron at the Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva in Switzerland. After reading *Fantasmagoriana*, an anthology of German ghost stories, Byron challenged Mary, Percy, and his personal physician, John William Polidori, each to compose a story. Byron, responding to his own challenge, began to write about the vampire legends he had heard while traveling in the Balkans. He aborted his attempt to bring the fragment to fruition, but Polidori, using Byron's fragment as inspiration, wrote *The Vampyre*, which, when published in 1819, became the progenitor of the Romantic vampire literary genre. Polidori's modest literary achievement would be eclipsed, however, by *Frankenstein*, which was Mary's response to Byron's challenge.

Mary began writing *Frankenstein* in June 1816, when she was still only eighteen years old; she would not finish it until the following May. The eleven months during which she was working on the novel were almost as macabre in real life as was the unfolding of the plot in the teenager's fevered imagination. In October 1816 Fanny Imlay, Mary's half sister, committed suicide, and in December the drowned body of Harriet Shelley was discovered in the Serpentine, in London's Hyde Park, some weeks after she had presumably committed suicide. On December 30, only days after the discovery of Harriet's body, Mary and Percy were married in St. Mildred's Church in Bread Street, London. (The church had been selected because Bread Street was where John Milton had been born more than two centuries earlier.) In March 1817 Percy was denied custody of his two children by Harriet. All this happened while Mary was working on *Frankenstein* and the shadow of these events account, no doubt, for much of the doom-laden and death-darkened atmosphere of the novel. It might almost be said, or at least plausibly suggested, that the ghost of Harriet Shelley haunted the author's imagination as she worked; if so, it is equally plausible to suggest that the Monster can be seen as a metaphor for the destructive power of the unleashed passion between Mary and Percy. Following the same line of deduction, it could be said that Frankenstein's guilt-ridden horror of the destruction he had caused is itself a reflection of Mary's guilt at the consequences of her passionate affair with Shelley. This allegorical reading of the novel would place Mary Shelley in the role of Victor Frankenstein, and the Monster in the role of the illicit and destructive relationship between Mary and Percy.

Although the presence of this tragic backdrop pervades the work, it should not eclipse the many other elements that serve to add to the deadly cocktail of depth and delusion that makes *Frankenstein* such a beguilingly deceptive story. From the very beginning, on the title page itself, we are given tantalizing clues concerning the aesthetic and philosophical roots of Mary Shelley's inspiration and perhaps an inkling of her purpose. In giving *Frankenstein* the alternative title of*The Modern Prometheus*, and coupling it with the epigraph conveying Adam's complaint from *Paradise Lost*, we see the leitmotif established concerning the relationship between Creator, creature, and creativity. The allusion to the Prometheus myth conjures images of the creation of man in defiance of the gods; the citation of Adam's complaint conjures the image of the creation of man in defiance of man:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay To mould me man? Did I solicit thee From darkness to promote me?

Prometheus presumes to take powers that are not rightfully his in order to create man; Adam presumes to rebuke his Creator for bringing him into existence. It is clear, therefore, that Victor Frankenstein can be seen as a Prometheus figure, and the Monster as a figure of Milton's Adam,

It is important from the outset to distinguish between the biblical Adam and the Adam depicted by Milton in Paradise Lost, The two Adams are very different, and it is perilous to conflate them. The biblical Adam does not rebuke his Creator for bringing him into existence; at most he blames Eve for his fall and implies, in the naked shame of his transgression, that it would have been better if God had not created her to be his mate. He never takes the prideful position of questioning the Creator's wisdom in creating him; still less does he imply the nihilistic option of wishing his own oblivion. On the contrary, it is clear that he remains grateful to God for his existence and grateful for the gift of Eve, in spite of his adolescent defensiveness in the wake of their primal act of disobedience.

Milton's Adam, like Milton's Satan--and, for that matter, Milton's Father and Milton's Son--is a presumptive product of Milton's own theological prejudices, divorced from orthodox tradition. It should be remembered that Milton's quasi-unitarianism is anathema to Protestants and Catholics alike. His Father appears to be a petty dictator; his Satan, a freedom-fighter; his Son, a mere creature, cold and arrogant, who is created after Satan; and his Holy Spirit, conspicuous by his absence. It is therefore a peculiar Miltonian "Christianity" that serves as a catalyst to Mary Shelley's imagination. Whether she knew it or not, she was not reacting against Christianity per se but against a pseudo-Christian heresy. As such, any reading of *Frankenstein* that purports to see it as an attack on Christian orthodoxy, as understood by Protestants or Catholics, is hopelessly awry.

**FOOTNOTE:**[1] J. Paul Hunter, preface to Mary Shelley, Frankenstein (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), p. vii.

[**Order the Ignatius Critical Editions edition of *Frankenstein* and read Joseph Pearce's entire introduction.**](http://www.ignatius.com/ViewProduct.aspx?SID=1&Product_ID=3290&AFID=12&) Also included, in addition to the annotated first edition of the novel (published in 1818), are four additional essays of contemporary criticism: "'The Spark of Life': The Science Behind Frankenstein" by Jo Bath, "*Frankenstein* as Mythic Tragedy: The Horror Story of a Culture of Death" by Philip Nielsen, "Will the Real Monster Please Stand Up? Creator and Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*" by Thomas W. Stanford III, and "'You Have Read This Strange and Terrific Story': The Epistolary Novel as Monstrous Reading in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*" by Aaron Urbanczyk.

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