The Mortality of Maternity: A Defense for Victor Frankenstein

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Critical commentators across the spectrum agree that Victor Frankenstein is, at his mildest, unsympathetic towards women and, at his worst, a misogynist. As a result, scholars see Victor as an anti-feminist figure. My research began with a question: why would Mary Shelley, daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, be so inclined to center her novel around a character with such attitudes towards women? What I found was that my premise was wrong: Victor is not a misogynist or unsympathetic towards women. In fact, the opposite is true. In this essay, I argue that Victor’s original intention in creating the creature was in part to spare Elizabeth from a maternal death; through this process, Victor misunderstands the definition of a mother and, becoming one himself, is destined to endure the maternal fate he tried so desperately to avoid.

Applying psychoanalytic concepts such as Freud’s Dream Theory and Talk Therapy to Victor’s narrative reveals that it is Victor’s subconscious fear of matricide and the pursuit of female preservation that lead to his monstrous creation. I further support my argument with statistics and historical context to further identify the existence of maternal anxiety that Shelley, and England as a whole, would have faced during the time of the novel’s publication. This paper adds a new level of understanding to Frankenstein that will help change the way the novel is viewed in its entirety. This interpretation opens the door for further readings that will break the critical mold by challenging the claims of Victor’s misogyny or anti-feminist intent.

Introduction

Critics and scholars alike have obsessed over Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein for more than a century. Specifically, many feminist critics have argued that Victor’s creation stems from his (and possibly Shelley’s) misogynist intentions. For instance, Mary Poovey has theorized that the creature was “a product of self-serving desire” (346). Other critics, like Anne Mellor, argue that by eliminating the female element from his creative process, “Frankenstein has eliminated the female’s primary biological function and source of cultural power” (355). However, these theories fail to consider that Shelley wrote of Victor’s endeavors not for him to be criticized for his unnatural creation, but to show that creation is often linked to a maternal death, no matter the form. In this essay, I am not arguing that Victor Frankenstein is entirely blameless: he is irresponsible and caused many innocent deaths through his negligence. However, I will argue that his original intention was in part to spare Elizabeth from a maternal death; through this process, Victor misunderstands the definition of a mother and, becoming one himself, is destined to endure the maternal fate he tried so desperately to avoid. Applying psychoanalytic concepts such as Dream Theory and Talk Therapy to analyze Victor Frankenstein’s narrative reveals that it is Victor’s subconscious fear of matricide and
the pursuit of female preservation that leads to his monstrous creation.

The Limits of Biographical Interpretation

Before discussing my own interpretation, it is necessary to address those critics who read *Frankenstein* chiefly from a biographical perspective, arguing that the events of Shelley’s life (especially the guilt over her relationship with Percy and the deaths of her children) inform her position in the novel. Critics such as Robert Britton overwhelmingly find parallels between Shelley’s novel and her life. In his essay, “Mary Shelley’s Monster: What Made the Monster Monstrous?” Britton states that Shelley’s personal endeavors are “clearly connected” to her fictional story. He explains these personal connections: “her mother’s death in childbirth; [Percy] Shelley’s abandonment of Harriet and his children; her experience of having a dead baby girl; a birth of a son to whom she gave her own pre-natal name; and her increasing hostility to Claire [her stepsister]” (4). I will examine each of these commonly-used theories briefly to help identify which are relevant and which are irrelevant to a close reading of *Frankenstein*.

It should first be understood that not all of these claims have textual evidence within the novel itself. Many scenarios from Shelley’s personal life have been pulled as elements of inspiration but critics are often reaching for nonexistent parallels and grasping at insignificant details. In this way, for instance, there is no actual evidence to suggest that the jealousy Shelley felt towards her “ménage à trois” (Britton 4) with Percy Bysshe Shelley and Claire Clairmont had any influence on her novel in either subject or tone. Similarly, critics use biography to find similarities between *Frankenstein* and Shelley’s guilty conscience toward Percy Bysshe Shelley’s abandonment of his first wife Harriet and his children. It is commonly thought that Shelley felt responsible for Harriet’s abandonment and her third-trimester suicide (Britton 3); however, the “facts” surrounding this “love triangle” have manifested from decades of gossip and rumor, leaving little evidence behind the motives or emotional attachments regarding the events that actually transpired (3). Riddled with speculation, these events should be excluded from any textual analysis of *Frankenstein*.

Autobiographical close readings of *Frankenstein* also assume the superiority of such readings, rejecting the novel’s greater purpose of establishing a significant, broad societal message. This is especially true in arguments made about Shelley’s own experience as a mother. It is true that Shelley suffered miscarriages and the loss of children, including a daughter who died in 1815. But critics overemphasize the impact these specific events had on her book, and do so at the expense of her larger point about the universality of such losses. For example, Shelley’s naming the youngest Frankenstein child William serves a greater, desegregated purpose than its connection with her “pre-natal name.” The name William in the context of the novel should be viewed as an “everychild” name instead of just a direct connection to Shelley. Britton explains that Shelley named her own son, born in 1816, William (4), while he fails to mention that Shelley also had a step-brother, born to Mary Jane and William Godwin in 1803, also named William; here, it is also important to remember that Shelley’s son William died of malaria in 1818 only after the release of *Frankenstein* and therefore the child’s death had no involvement in the completion of the novel. William was an extraordinarily popular name for centuries, second only to John, presenting the audience with a name so commonly used that every reader may
associate the tragedy of William Frankenstein with a child they know and love. Shelley created an “everychild” to pair with the “everywoman,” Margaret (discussed in more detail below), to fully immerse her readers so they might be able to see themselves in situations similar to these “everycharacters.”

Of course, there are some connections to be made between Shelley’s life and work. For instance, the details of Mary Wollstonecraft’s death are relevant to Victor’s subsequent “labor,” but this inspiration is used sparingly and does not hold significance elsewhere apart from the overarching theme of maternal mortality. Carving these descriptions from personal experience, Shelley uses these images to help the reader better understand Victor’s symbolic struggle and are not to be confused with a translation of Shelley’s assuming role of either monster or creator. In her introduction to the third edition, Shelley says, “I did not make myself the heroine of my tales,” further adding that “I was not confined to my own identity” (166). Later in the same introduction, Shelley says, “[the novel] was the offspring of happy days when death and grief were but words, which found no true echo in my heart” (169). Britton claims that he “treat[s] the preface of 1831 as if it were a preliminary consultation” (1-2), suggesting that he understands Shelley’s intentions better than the writer herself. Some sections of this introduction seem like softened forms of actual events; however, Shelley’s position as a woman and gothic writer have allowed for such discrepancies between her feelings and her words. Unabashed, however, are her incessant claims that her novel does not reflect her biography. Those choosing to read Frankenstein critically must first open themselves to the possibility that Shelley understood the story she was telling, void of subconscious or suppressed thoughts to create a character who is full of subconscious and suppressed thoughts, bringing a new level of maternal understanding to her audience.

Mother and Son: Talking to Margaret, Looking at Victor

Reading Frankenstein with the observation of the novel’s in-text audience reveals a cautionary tale toward motherhood instead of a blanketed, anti-feminist motif. The novel presents a deep, three-framed narrative, beginning and ending with the narrative voice of Robert Walton. Ending the story with Walton’s narrative reminds the audience that the narrative is presented through letters to Walton’s sister. The novel’s “audience,” then, is a woman. Realizing the novel was written by a woman author and intentionally guided towards a female audience makes it difficult to assume that the novel was written with misogynist intent. Instead, Shelley’s novel is designed to raise awareness of the psychological and physical dangers surrounding motherhood among her female readers (and possibly her male readers, too).

Margaret Saville’s presence in the novel is nondescript and therefore nonrestrictive. Her lack of a voice could be seen as a “silencing” of the female audience but it is more logical to assume that her omnipotent position makes every woman reader “Margaret,” targeting her attention of each woman individually. Margaret is not given an age, social class, or physical characteristics; therefore, Margaret becomes the subsequent “everywoman” figure of the novel. The only reoccurring description of Margaret is that she is “beloved” and Walton has a great affection for her, not unlike his affection for Victor. It is not until the final pages of the novel that Walton reveals that Margaret has children (153). Shelley uses
this closing reveal about Margaret to hit the audience with a moment of concern for this woman that they have all become symbolically through reading of Walton’s letters.

Through the eyes of Margaret, every woman reader is able to experience and recognize the universality of maternal anxiety through Victor’s symbolic struggle. Similarly, every male reader is able to understand and sympathize with the universality of Walton’s anxiety betwixt these parental realms of danger. As a whole, this novel’s structure of informative presentation between Robert and Margaret becomes the basis for every reader to experience the text.

“[E]ntirely forgetful of herself”:
Mortality & Motherhood

Just as the novel’s in-text audience is important, so too is the narrator; Shelley chooses to portray the events of Victor’s life from the view of an unbiased source. Walton, the ship’s captain, initially has no personal investment in the story he is being told by Victor and therefore can be trusted as an unbiased narrator in his letters to his sister. Walton meets Victor Frankenstein at the very end of his horrible and tragic journey, yet Walton does not describe the man he sees before him as “mad” or “evil.” Walton begins the novel in his own voice, with which he explains that Victor has a “sweetness that [he] never saw equaled” (15). He continues to note that Victor is “gentle,” “cultivated,” and “although his words are culled with the choicest art…they flow with a rapidity and unparalleled eloquence” (16). Walton also says that Victor is “broken in spirit,” asserting that Victor’s afflictions did not make him a worse man: “yet when he has retired into himself, he will be like a celestial spirit, that has a halo around him, within those circle no grief or folly ventures” (17). These descriptions of Victor appear at the chronological end of the story, but as a first impression for the reader; therefore, they can be used to describe Victor’s personality in a full-circle perspective. This means that the reader starts the novel believing that Victor is “sweet,” “eloquent,” and “broken,” and by the end of Victor’s tale should use these same adjectives instead of substituting them for “mad,” “evil,” and “egotistical.” This circular, unbiased description of Victor Frankenstein makes it difficult to assume that Shelley intended to demonize this character. Thus if the novel is read entirely with the remembrance that Victor is “sweet,” “eloquent,” and “broken in spirit,” his original intentions can be realized and his motives become far less sinister.

The conversation between Walter and Victor acts as both a cautionary tale for Walton and a session of Talk Therapy for Victor. Upon his arrival on the stranded ship, Victor begins to tell Walton of the endeavors he has faced over the last several years. This is arguably the first time Victor has ever talked of his experience to another person. Psychoanalysis describes Talk Therapy as a session in which the patient “talk[s] freely, in such a way that the repressed fears and conflicts which are causing the problems are brought into the conscious mind and openly faced, rather than remaining ‘buried’ in the unconscious” (Barry 92). Therefore, the way that Victor structures his cautionary tale also becomes the first time Victor’s fear of matricide surfaces from his subconscious. Ellen Moers, in her essay “Female Gothic: the Monster’s Mother,” notes that Shelley “provides an unusual thickening of the background of the tale with familial fact and fantasy” (327), showing that Victor’s family and his life before the monster holds significant value to the origin of his creation. This “unusual thickening” becomes critical
to understanding Victor’s mentality and motives surrounding the creation of his monster.

Victor’s story beginning well before the monster’s creation, the Frankenstein lineage helps emphasize the novel’s overall pattern of maternal mortality. His mother, Victor explains, became an orphan after her father’s death, though when or how her mother (Victor’s grandmother) died is never mentioned. Her absence from this opening story would suggest that she died well before the events described, most likely early in Caroline’s life if not during childbirth. Directly after the story of how Victor’s mother became orphaned, Victor explains that his adopted sister, Elizabeth, also lost her mother in infancy, which is how she came to be in the Frankenstein household. It is no coincidence that Victor opens his tale with two instances of maternal death. Victor’s compulsion to begin his story with events that happened very early (and even before) his childhood indicate that he has been living with a repressed fear of maternal death his entire life. Geoffrey Chamberlain, in his article “British Maternal Mortality, in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries,” explains that these situations were common during the time of the novel’s publication:

Although death rates from many other conditions were high, they at least were among people who had been ill beforehand. Death in relation to childbirth was mostly in fit young women who had been quite well before becoming pregnant. They died, often leaving the baby, and other children in the family from previous births with a widowed husband…it is only recently that the Church of England prayer book removed the service for the “churching of women who had recently given birth” which starts by giving thanks to God for: “the safe deliverance and preservation from the great dangers of childbirth.” (559)

Chamberlain continues to explain that before the Registration Death Act of 1837, finding an exact number of women who died due to complications of childbirth is difficult, but the idea that the Church of England had a long-standing designated prayer for the “safe deliverance and preservation from the great dangers of childbirth” shows that maternal mortality was significantly common. Irvine Loudon, in his book Death in Childbirth, gives a “crude death rate” of eleven woman daily in nineteenth-century England, which means over 4,000 women are estimated to have died annually in England due to complications faced in childbirth (160, 163). Moreover, it did not become mandatory to record the cause of death until 1870 (Chamberlain 559), giving light to the possibility that even more women died from undocumented complications of childbirth than had been reflected in Loudon’s conservative estimates. Victor’s opening stories, his father’s work for the public, and the historical context provided show that Victor would have been well-aware of the maternal mortality rate at a very young age—and this information would haunt his subconscious throughout his adolescence.

Despite his internal fear of matricide, Victor Frankenstein lived a very happy childhood, indicating that he suffered no childhood trauma to later manifest into contempt for domesticity or inherent misogyny. Poovey, in her essay “‘My Hideous Progeny’: The Lady and the Monster” suggests that “Frankenstein would deny relationships (and women) any role in the conception of children…and feed his selfish desires (347). But I would argue that Victor says repeatedly within these opening pages that he is pro-domestic ties. He first explains that “no creature could have more tender parents than mine,” continuing that “no youth could have passed more happily
than mine” (19, 21). While it seems likely that Victor would be willing to lie about his experiences, lying about a happy childhood would not help justify his choices. In contrast, if Victor would have said he had a rather unhappy childhood, his audience would be more inclined to feel sympathy, and possibly forgive him, for some of the horrible choices he made, assuming that his poor decisions stemmed from a lack of parenting and maternal compassion. Instead, Victor Frankenstein is entirely honest during his Talk Therapy session with Walton. Victor’s reiteration of a happy childhood emphasizes the strong bond Victor shares with Caroline, further emphasizing the devastation he faced in her maternal death.

Through his mother’s sacrifice, Victor develops a new understanding of irrational acts performed by mothers for their children’s well-being, which becomes a significant pattern throughout the novel. Victor says his mother fought desperately to save the life of her father: “She procured plain work; she plaited straw and by various means contrived to earn pittance scarcely sufficient to support life” (19). Finally, Victor supplies the image that Caroline’s father “died in her arms” (19) to show that Caroline never gives up in her pursuit to save her father, caring for him until the very moment of his death. This image not only shows Caroline’s compassion, but also the idea that “motherhood” in the text isn’t just a biological concept. Though Caroline at this point is not a biological mother, she plays a maternal role through the nurturing care she gives her father. Victor praises his mother passionately for the sacrifices she made for those she loved and for supplying him with a happy childhood. All of this information given by Victor himself as a precursor to his creation leaves little to suggest that Victor would want to “reduce domestic ties” at all. In fact, Victor lives a wholesome seventeen years with the joy of domesticity in the Frankenstein household before he knew true sadness.

This joyful praise of Caroline is contrasted by the devastating blow felt by the Frankenstein household upon her death, specifically, the emergence of the grief and maternal anxiety that will haunt Victor for the rest of his life:

It is so long before my mind can persuade itself that she, whom we saw every day, and whose very existence is a part of our own, can have departed for ever—that the brightness of a beloved eye can have extinguished, and the sound of a voice so familiar, and so dear to the ear, can be hushed, never more to be heard. (25-26)

Victor calls his mother’s existence “a part of our own,” explaining the full weight felt at the loss of his mother, a woman who once literally carried Victor in her own body. He describes her death as an extinguished light and a newfound silence, showing the metaphorical hole Victor is tumbling into at the realization of his mother’s departure. In Talk Therapy, this is the moment in which it becomes known that Victor’s life has undoubtedly changed, and his personality begins to spiral with the anxiety of his loss. Victor calls his mother’s death “the first misfortune of my life… an omen, as it were, of my future misery” (25). In this retrospective realization, Victor sees Caroline’s death as the beginning of his lifelong struggle to obtain maternal preservation. Significantly, Caroline does not die in childbirth or shortly thereafter, but as a result of her maternal instinct, illustrating just how dangerous all forms of maternal work can be for women. When Elizabeth catches scarlet fever, Caroline cannot resist the urge to tend to Elizabeth in her chamber while the infection is still contagious, ignoring all suggestions that she be more cautious. In her compulsion to care for her
daughter with the same maternal compassion she previously demonstrated towards her own father, Caroline catches scarlet fever and the illness takes her life in lieu of Elizabeth’s. Caroline’s self-sacrificing maternal impulses for her father and adopted daughter helps define Shelley’s use of “maternity.” A “mother” is most generally defined as biologically, however, Shelley effectively defines a “mother” as having a responsibility to care and nurture another with love and sacrifice. *Frankenstein*, therefore, explores the entire realm of “motherhood” and the idea that maternal mortality can seem inevitable for all those who share Caroline’s inclination to care for another. Victor (sweet, eloquent, broken Victor) now realizes the truly frequent linkage between mortality and motherhood and his subconscious fear of matricide grows exponentially. For Victor, to be loved by a woman means to risk being the very thing that kills that woman.

Caroline’s death marks the third maternal death in Victor’s narration and demonstrates a consequence of maternal mortality: the involuntary abandonment of other children for the life of one, ultimately enlisting Elizabeth as her unfortunate successor. Caroline’s death for Elizabeth leaves her youngest child, William, an infant without a mother. Historically, this is often the case with the death of a mother. Many times, a woman will leave behind small children, who are unable to care for themselves. Fortunately for the younger Frankenstein boys, Elizabeth is able to take over as the primary caregiver after Caroline’s passing. Soon after Caroline’s death, Victor begins to see Elizabeth as a mother herself, mentioning that she “instructed [his] two brothers” and “was continually endeavoring to contribute to the happiness of others, entirely forgetful of herself” (26), just like Caroline before her. The selfless mothering qualities that killed Caroline could very well kill Elizabeth, too. If not, then mere childbirth itself could. Either way, Victor realizes that Elizabeth might die in the pursuit of their (eventual) child’s well-being. This fear is further solidified in the nightmare Victor later describes after the creation of his monster:

> I thought I saw Elizabeth in the bloom of health, walking in the street of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. (36)

This passage has been popular with scholars who want to understand Victor’s mind. Following the psychoanalytic model, this dream should be interpreted using Freud’s Dream Theory, which “believes that a dream is an escape-hatch or safety-valve through which repressed desires, fears, or memories seek an outlet into the conscious mind” (Barry 94). Barbara Almond suggests that the dream “reveals Frankenstein’s secret wish: to bring to life and embrace his dead mother” (64), but the dream allows for no resurrection, only decay. Victor has been frightened by his creature mere hours before this dream and therefore the readers should see the dream revealing his true *fears*, not his true desires. Consider the aforementioned passage in which Chamberlain explains that those women who die in childbirth are beforehand “fit young women who had been quite well before becoming pregnant,” just as Elizabeth in Victor’s dream had seemed “in the bloom of health.” Also consider that “bloom” refers to the dawning of life, or more specifically, the genesis of a new flower. This would insinuate that Victor saw Elizabeth “in the bloom of health,” perhaps
as a healthy young woman in the early stages of pregnancy. Elizabeth then transforms into the corpse of Victor’s mother; Victor had previously made connections between Elizabeth and Caroline’s personality and maternal instinct and as such, fears that Elizabeth may also die for a child. Victor’s subconscious goal, therefore, is to find a way to further the Frankenstein name, and his legacy, without subjecting Elizabeth to a maternal death.

Victor, while very much in love with Elizabeth, is reluctant to marry her, showing his fear that such a path would lead Elizabeth to the same maternal fate endured by his mother. The love Victor has for his mother suggests that he would not hesitate to give Caroline her dying wish to see Victor and Elizabeth wed (25) and they could have easily married before Victor left for the university but he delays their union for quite some time. A clear answer to why Victor procrastinates to fulfill the dying wish of his mother to marry the woman he loved is never spoken, but I would argue that Victor’s fear of maternal mortality has become too strong to risk Elizabeth’s life. Victor claims that his grief over his mother’s and his brother’s death keeps him from a union with Elizabeth (26, 48), but ulterior motives seem to be a part of Victor’s delay. As Victor arrives at his childhood home after the tragic death of William, he suddenly recounts the paintings on the mantelpiece:

It was an historical subject, painted at my father’s desire, and represented Caroline Beaufort in an agony of despair, kneeling by the coffin of her dead father. Her garb was rustic, and her cheek pale; but there was an air of dignity and beauty, that hardly permitted the sentiment of pity. Below this picture was a miniature of William. (51) Victor waits to recount this painting until after the death of William, showing the relationship between the first object of Caroline’s maternity (her father) and the last (William). He recalls that Caroline was painted in “an agony of despair” with her “cheek pale,” indicating that she has been weary and saddened since her very first descent into motherhood and would have found the same anguish if alive for the further tragedy of her youngest son. Victor recognizes this as a pain that could only be associated with the sacrifice of motherhood, solidifying the idea that Victor wishes to keep such tragedies from bestowing themselves on Elizabeth. Victor, therefore, hopes to pursue a legacy that is scientific, not purely biological and therefore save Elizabeth from maternal death and despair. After Caroline’s death, Victor returns to school in lieu of marrying Elizabeth in a desperate attempt to find another way to continue the Frankenstein name.

Creating the Monster/ Saving the Mother: Victor’s Doomed Quest

For Victor, achieving a groundbreaking scientific advancement would preserve his name, thereby relieving him of the responsibility of having children with Elizabeth, decreasing her chances experiencing premature death. Oftentimes, individuals without a biological lineage will find another way to preserve their name in history. At this point, it is of the utmost significance to emphasize that Victor Frankenstein did not expect his creature to be a successful animation:

I prepared for the multitude of reverses; my operations might be increasingly baffled, and at last my work imperfect: yet, when I consider the improvement which every day takes place in science and mechanics, I was encouraged to hope my present
attempts would at least lay the foundations of future success. (33)

Victor strives for a goal that he believes unobtainable within his lifetime in the hopes that the slightest bit of progress would name him as the “father” of his field; he wanted to “lay the foundations for future success” and not necessarily be his own successor. Consider that his work pre-dates the real-world advancements of both Nikola Tesla and Charles Darwin; therefore, Frankenstein’s scientific advancements could have named him father of electricity and evolution respectively. In the 1831 introduction, Shelley mentions overhearing a conversation about the “experiments of Dr. [Erasmus] Darwin” (168), though her specific information may be a little misguided, the reference to these new scientific advancements show that the idea of a scientific legacy was a considerable factor when developing the character of Victor Frankenstein. In fact, when developing his second monster, Victor talks of “discoveries having been made by an English philosopher,” which may have been an actual nod towards Erasmus Darwin himself. An advancement such as these would thereby preserve the name “Frankenstein” with the respect modern readers now recognize and associate with Charles Darwin and Tesla instead of the degradation of becoming synonymous with “mad scientist.” However, Victor bypassed becoming the father of these fields and, with the creation of the monster, becomes yet another tragic mother.

Most scholars agree on the overall symbolism of the monster’s animation resembling a mother in labor. Almond notes that “Frankenstein’s creation of his monster reads like a grotesque pregnancy and childbirth” (63). Natural childbirth (i.e. childbirth before the spinal epidural) is unarguably one of the most painful of the naturally occurring human experiences. The pain of childbirth also produces a high fever and the labor itself may last several days before birth, just as Victor claims his labor lasted several days and nights (32). For many women, the only thought that pushes them through this gut-wrenching horror is the belief that all of the pain will cease with the passing of the child. Victor outright says that he spent time in “painful labor” (32) and became “oppressed by a slow fever” (35), he was “nervous to a most painful degree” and told himself that these symptoms would go away when the birthing was complete (35).

Victor not only follows through with the symptoms of childbirth, but also with the misconception that the danger is over once the child is born. The resulting consequence of this miscalculation is that Victor himself falls victim to his own death in motherhood. Surviving the birth of the monster, Victor becomes dangerously ill, mirroring the edge of mortality balanced by many mothers in the afterbirth, oftentimes claiming their life. Chamberlain explains that hemorrhages, puerperal pyrexia, and eclampsia were three of the four leading causes of maternal death in the nineteenth-century, all of which occur postpartum with symptoms generally occurring between one and three days after delivery. Mary Shelley’s own mother “died from puerperal sepsis [a form of puerperal pyrexia] eleven days after giving birth” (Britton 3). Almond further explains the circumstances of Mary Wollstonecraft’s death:

The midwife in attendance was unable to deliver the placenta. A doctor was called in. He removed the placenta manually, piece by piece, under the usual septic conditions that prevailed at the time, infecting and ultimately killing his patient. (58)

Shelley drew from these accounts of her mother’s death to accurately display the connection between Victor and the dangers of maternity. After the birth of the monster, Victor is described as thin, pale, and feverish...
(38-39), which are all symptoms commonly attributed to infections such as puerperal sepsis. Wollstonecraft’s placenta had to be removed “piece by piece,” just as Victor’s monster was created—piece by piece (31). Furthermore, the blood of the placenta (which is usually the cause of the infection) is oftentimes referred to as “cadaver blood” for its non-clotting qualities (Chamberlain). Similarly, Frankenstein’s creature had been birthed by assembling different cadaver limbs piece by piece which resulted in a several-months-long illness that resembled the infecting that killed Wollstonecraft eleven days after the birth of Mary Shelley. Victor, however, escapes the immediate maternal death that took the mother of Mary Shelley, though not for long.

Unaware of the inevitability of his maternal mortality, Victor is unwilling to gamble with fate with the creation of a second monster when the first creature demands a wife. As Victor struggles to justify another creation, Shelley uses the second monster to demonstrate the difficult decision faced by many mothers in the eighteenth-century to carry additional children to term. With an alarming rate of mortality in both mother and infant, mothers often risked their own life and the well-being of their existing children for another child who may not survive their first year. This heartbreaking fact is explored through Victor’s decision not to become a mother to another monster for the greater good of mankind. Victor at first reluctantly agrees to make his monster a companion, saying, “I shuddered when I thought of the possible consequences of my consent; but I felt that there was some justice in his argument” (102), emphasizing Victor’s contemplation between the good of the “one” against the good of the “whole.” Ultimately, he is led “to consider the effects of what [he] was now doing” when considering a second monster “whose dispositions [he] was alike ignorant” (118), showing that Victor is uncertain of the future that would be made with this second monster and emphasizing another form of maternal anxiety. As previously mentioned, Chamberlain states that women often died “leaving the baby, and other children in the family from previous births.” When the novel was first published, this often also meant the death of the infant and the death of the older children who now lacked proper maternal care. Therefore Victor’s struggle between the good of his monster and the good of mankind becomes the struggle of the well-being of the baby against the well-being of the family.

It is also likely Victor understands that he may not survive the birth of the second monster after the dangerous illness that befell him after the creation of the first, thereby leaving two creations alone and unchecked. Victor doubts that his monster will be able to live in exile as he has promised (103) and likely feels more reluctant to leave the couple without his maternal supervision in their worldly endeavors. Loudon explains that “before the 1880s, the mortality from puerperal fever was appalling” (49), giving little hope that Victor may survive a second encounter with the illness and therefore unable to remain a mother to his two children.

Victor may also fear that the creation of his second monster could be unsuccessful. Victor laments that he “feared the vengeance of the disappointed fiend” and that he “could not compose a female without again devoting several months to profound study and laborious disquisition” (107). Here, the monster should not be disappointed, but rather excited at the prospect of the promised companion. This “disappointment” and the extra labor set upon by Victor insinuates that he is worried that he will not achieve the same level of success with his second attempt at animation, showing that Victor is now not only faced with the anxiety of
matricide but also the anxiety of infanticide. Loudon explains that for every four or five mothers that may have died due to childbirth complications in the eighteenth-century “100 or more infants perished” (164-165) emphasizing dangers faced by both Victor and the new monster in a situation that could inevitably kill both, leaving the first monster entirely alone.

There is no doubt that the termination of the second monster is intentional, but the definitions surrounding her end are debatable. The most common interpretation of this scene is an abortion, as Victor violently tears up the body, a pre-natal death for an unwanted child; I will argue, though, that the second monster is symbolic of an unsuccessful birth due, much like those that occurred in a case of Childhood Rickets or Grossly Contracted Pelvis in the mother. In cases of Childhood Rickets and Grossly Contracted Pelvis, the mother’s pelvis becomes horribly misshapen which makes it very difficult to naturally pass a child.

Loudon explains that “there was said to be an ‘epidemic’ of rickets in the mid-nineteenth century” (136), the beginning of which would have become noticeable in the Shelley’s lifetime. In these such cases, surgery was sometimes an option, but “it was much more common to sacrifice the baby—if it was not already dead—by the operation of craniotomy or ‘lessening the head.’ If that was not enough, embryotomy might be performed when the baby was dismembered in utero and removed piece by piece” (Loudon 133). Therefore, instead of an entirely optional abortion, the second monster is sacrificed when Victor sees he is unfit to continue in the laboring process. He sees that he may be able to survive and better care for himself and the existing monster, a child who has already brought heartache to the world.

Conclusion

Victor Frankenstein makes his journey across the frozen tundra, chasing his creature. Almond notes that “Frankenstein begins and ends in the frozen wastes of the Arctic Circle, the white, old breast of the dead mother” (62). I argue that this setting is entirely appropriate, given that maternal death is the inevitable, dominating theme in the text. In his final moments, Victor recounts that he has spent his last few days “occupied in examining [his] past conduct” (156), during which he comes to terms with his fears and accepts his fate in the irrational pursuit of the creature, not unlike his own mother’s irrational pursuit to enter Elizabeth’s infected bed chamber. Both Victor and Caroline succumb to the elements surrounding their non-biological prodigy—but such is the instinct of a mother. Brought into a world where motherhood often equalled death and determined to change that, Victor Frankenstein (sweet, eloquent, broken Victor) has been destined to a maternal fate—such is the instinct of a mother. Brought into a world where motherhood often equalled death and determined to change that, Victor Frankenstein (sweet, eloquent, broken Victor) has been destined to a maternal fate from the opening pages of the novel. At the end, no amount of psychoanalysis would save him from his fate, but his final conversation with Walton, his Talk Therapy, helps Victor come to terms with his long-lived fear and accept his maternal mortality.

Works Cited


