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**“Being a mother is an attitude, not a biological relation”:
Mother as Monster in Mary Shelley’s
*Frankenstein***

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The traditional notion of motherhood is challenged in the male world of *Frankenstein* (1818), which offers the reader an alternative maternal figure whose presence disturbs the position of the family’s natural matriarch. This action subverts the family unit, and leads to social disorder as the mother, who is usually a fundamental presence in their child’s life, is suddenly removed, while the new-born creation (in this particular text), becomes an anomaly of the natural order. This article will explore how Victor’s abandonment and ill-treatment of his progeny secures his status as the true monster of *Frankenstein*. He is either directly or indirectly responsible for all actions in the story because he is the catalyst for the chain of events that start after the birth of his creation. He later recognises this by

claiming responsibility for the Monster's terrible deeds, and accepting that his maternal ambitions are responsible for the murder of the potential/natural mother figure of '[Elizabeth as well as] ... William, Justine, and Henry – they all died at my hands' (Shelley 179).

Victor's study of 'the causes of life' (49) awakens his desire to mimic the female act of childbirth by 'giv[ing] life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man' (51). This ambition likens him to Dr Schreber of Sigmund Freud's *Psychoanalytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia*, who had similar aspirations (Veeder 91). Schreber, however, believed that in order to achieve this task and be able to bear children, he must be emasculated and transform himself into a woman as he felt that 'already feminine nerves had entered into his body, from which through direct fertilization from God, [new] men ... would issue' (Freud 2). This creates a blurring of gender that results in a problematic identity that is neither male nor female, as the lone parent must now fulfil both components of their creation's parental unit. This dilemma is epitomized by Victor in *Frankenstein* as he struggles unsuccessfully to nurture or love the Monster after his birth. He speaks of his admiration for the Monster's physical beauty during its assemblage, only to proclaim his repulsion when it is finally brought to life. This echoes the mother's wariness of her new-born, as discussed by Simone de Beauvoir, who argues strongly against the existence of a maternal 'instinct'. She describes how a young

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mother can feel threatened by her baby, and that it is her 'attitude ... and her reaction to [her new situation]' (de Beauvoir 526) that ultimately decides whether she will accept or reject her child. While the text offers no explanation for the Monster's ugliness, this development contradicts Victor's previous claim that 'his limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful' (Shelley 55). Psychoanalytically, this implies, as argued below, that the Monster's transition to the grotesque can be read as Victor's perception of him, which is due to the aforementioned attitude and reaction of the parent to the newborn. This notion is central to the concern of this article because it illustrates how the amalgamation of female identity and motherhood is a social construction rather than a biological component of womanhood. In other words, it is not the parent's gender but rather their attitude towards the newborn which dictates their acceptance or rejection of the role, which subsequently proves that motherhood is not an inherent part of female identity.

The shift in Victor's opinion occurs at the exact moment of the creature's rebirth when 'the beauty of my dream vanished and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart' (Shelley 55), which suggests that Victor may have simply confused the beauty of the dead parts with the beauty of the whole organism (Baldick 33-5). The overwhelming antipathy that Victor now feels for the awakened creation causes him to reject his child; an act which Moers considers the most powerful, and also the most feminine, in the novel. She links it to postnatal

mythology, namely to the natural revulsion against newborn life that encompasses the guilt surrounding birth and its consequences (Moers 81). Victor's trauma at this afterbirth makes him unable to nurture, or even to name, his creation, and this henceforth becomes the motive for the Monster's revenge. This is further evidence of how any action carried out by him deflects back on Victor, whose inability to manage the Monster's terrible deeds after he has abandoned him is paralleled in de Beauvoir's study of the mother's struggle to control the infant and how this is a senseless task as she cannot possibly manage 'a being with whom [she is] not in communication' (de Beauvoir 531).

Maria Beville discusses how the initially gentle and submissive Monster only becomes a monstrous figure after he has been abandoned by his father, which is a development that results in his first-hand experience of 'the inhuman and unfeeling actions of others' (Beville 82). In an effort to correct these injustices, and to appease his Monster's desire for vengeance, Victor promises to create a female companion as both a peace-offering and as a plea to end his rampage. His actions can be viewed as a subversion of the typical 'family romance', since his behaviour in this instance illustrates a parent who wishes to gain freedom from his child. But his inability to complete the task for fear that 'she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate and delight in murder and wretchedness' (Shelley 160) bespeaks an attempt to control the female figure and to ensure that her sexuality is not awakened. His reason for refusing

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her creation voices the fear of femininity that is a common feature of many Gothic texts. Beville defines the threat of her enigmatic nature in terms of how she is 'not just unnameable [but] also unvoiced [because] [s]he represents that which is truly Other to the dominant male subjectivity of the narrative' (Beville 88). As a result, she must be removed from the text, which thereby illustrates Cixous' argument that patriarchy always demands for 'femininity to be associated with death' (Cixous 13) simply because both subjects are unrepresentable. Victor's destruction of the unfinished female Monster portrays this patriarchal demand because it eradicates any remaining semblance of femininity in the text, which subsequently creates a fixed connection between female identity and death. It can be argued that Victor's failure to complete the task of her creation is due to his unacknowledged unwillingness to let go of his Monster. Arguably, this separation anxiety stems from the death of his natural mother, Caroline, and this severance of mother from child is a split that threatens to be repeated in the creation of a female companion for the Monster, who would then have to honour his word and abandon Victor. Additionally, this female Monster in her finished form would be a companion for his original Monster, which suggests the possibility of a sexual union between them. The procreation of this new species would be dependent on her ability to carry and deliver their progeny, which highlights the ability, and in this case, the threat, of her reproductive organs. Thus the female monster

would mean that the power to give birth be again passed back to the female. These factors monopolise her embodiment of a monstrous version of motherhood, as well as a simultaneous new female figure who would be similar to the native and over whom society would have no power. Victor assumes that her freedom and strength, which are traditionally masculine qualities, could entail deadly consequences for male supremacy as her lack of dependence on men would suggest a coinciding inability to fit the traditional mould of motherhood. This can be read as a subversion of the social structure of the conventional family unit and would define her as an outsider similar to the primitive figure of the [original] 'native' whose corresponding lack of compliance with social order makes him/her 'the enemy of values ... the absolute evil' (JanMohamed 5).

There is an obvious union of female identity and passivity within the story, which marks the figure of the deceased mother as a symbol of how death is the ultimate act of passivity (Knoepflmacher 108). This supports Cixous' claim that 'woman is always on the side of passivity' (Cixous 360), because the family structure within male supremacy always leads back to the father, meaning that his position has more significance than that of the mother. Her inclusion of religious imagery in women's struggle for equality highlights the absence of a maternal/female presence in the masculine symbolism of the Holy Trinity, which can be interpreted as one of the most powerful signs in patriarchal society. This absence is mirrored in

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Frankenstein through the gradual removal and surrogacy of all other mothers from the text. Caroline secures Elizabeth's role as the replacement mother, when she 'endeavour[s] to resign [herself] cheerfully to death' (Shelley 41), and on her deathbed tells Elizabeth to marry Victor. Her demise promotes Elizabeth to her new position within the Frankenstein family. This replacement role as the family's matriarch signifies the ultimate union of both women's identities – an aspect of the story that is best illustrated in Victor's nightmare on the night of his Monster's birth. This dream sequence indicates a warning of future repercussions, as it is riddled with repressive images of death, decay, sexuality and woman (Botting 102):

I thought I saw Elizabeth in the bloom of health [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. (Shelley 56)

The fusion of the two women in this imagery is an example of how identity within the Gothic genre is often unstable, whereby one character can be replaced by another, usually the perpetrator of their death. Elizabeth's transitional maternal identity is further demonstrated by how her time before Caroline's death was largely spent on the periphery, patiently waiting for her opportunity to secure an important position within the family unit. Additionally, the ambiguity of her status as Caroline's double is suggested from the very

beginning of her time with them when she is affectionately called Victor's 'more-than-sister' and Alphonse's 'more-than-daughter' (34). These terms are evidence that she is simply 'the substitute who is always in the ready position' (Rickels 293), and illustrate how, in the world of *Frankenstein*, one woman must die so that another can self-actualise. Caroline's introduction of Elizabeth to Victor when he was just a young boy encourages the male possessiveness that is persistent throughout the novel as Victor declares that his mother 'presented Elizabeth to me as her promised gift ... mine to protect, love, and cherish ... a possession of my own ... since till death she was to be mine only' (Shelley 34). In this sense, she is immediately defined as Victor's prized possession and inferior other half, thereby demonstrating Cixous' claim of how society positions women below men.

Elizabeth's relationship with Victor is one of inequality that emphasises her situation as the outsider of his family, and so she takes on a servant-like role. The ambiguity of their familial roles as siblings, 'cousins', and a betrothed couple is a direct result of Elizabeth's adoption, which unavoidably defines part of her identity. She not only serves as Caroline's double, but also as that of the Monster, who later murders her. The conflict that occurs between these two characters is a direct result of Victor's rejection of the female figure in his domestic life, both through his hesitation to marry and recreate naturally with Elizabeth, as well as through the creation of his Monster. Victor's subconscious preoccupation with the death of the

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maternal figure is also shown in this nightmare sequence, which can be regarded as the antithesis of the childbirth motif. It symbolises the ultimate sacrifice which he must make in exchange for the formation of a female Monster, and suggests that Elizabeth's death is a necessary exchange for 'the transformation of a corpse into a living being' (Baldick 49). Moreover, the dream prefigures Elizabeth's fate at the hands of the Monster, who kills the new bride, and in so doing, fulfils his promise to 'be with [Victor] on [his] wedding-night' (Shelley 163). This terrible fate is predicted in the nightmare sequence and there is both a necrophilic and an oedipal significance to the event, as Victor only embraces her after she has transformed into his mother's corpse. This can be regarded as a foreshadowing of their eventual union when Victor later holds her corpse after she has been murdered by the Monster. These two occasions are the only times that the couple unite, due to the shadow of death that follows the potential mother, Elizabeth, throughout the story. She can even be defined as the catalyst for absent mothers in the text. As a carrier of death, she is firstly responsible for the death of her own birth mother, who according to the plot-change in the 1831 version of the novel, dies of blood poisoning from residual placenta. This tragedy mirrors Shelley's own tragic birth that cost her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, her life, and also portrays the common belief in many primitive societies that the placenta is the baby's twin, and so must be cared for until it has fully decayed as 'every baby is

shadowed at birth by a dead double' (Rickels 282). Secondly, Elizabeth can also claim responsibility for the death of her adoptive mother and Victor's birth mother, Caroline, who catches scarlet fever when nursing her back to health.

The nature of this disease is especially significant because it represents Elizabeth's ability, not only to contaminate and eliminate her sexual rival, but also to take over her role afterwards (Veeder 114). Her inadvertent rampage continues with the alternative mother figure of the nanny, Justine, whose death-sentence is secured unintentionally by Elizabeth's testimony, as she is subsequently charged with William's death, for which Elizabeth fruitlessly claims responsibility. This destruction of maternal figures is repeated once more when the Monster murders Elizabeth, and in so doing, removes the last surviving Frankenstein woman and prospective mother from the text. In the same fashion in which Elizabeth kills a maternal figure only to become her replacement, the Monster, in turn, becomes Elizabeth's replacement double. The collective absence of maternal figures extends beyond the Frankenstein household, and is witnessed by the Monster during his time in the wilderness. Here, he encounters the De Lacey family, and notes the sombre atmosphere that surrounds their home, describing them as a 'good' but 'unhappy' family unit, that shares an unspoken sorrow, which seems to be the mourning of their mother. Their household is especially significant as it represents the typical home of the

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novel that has a father-oriented family whose members never mention the absent parent (158).

The alternative depictions of the maternal figure in these texts symbolise how the dominating forces of patriarchal society demand contrasting definitions of the two genders. In doing so, motherhood is depicted as being an essential characteristic of civilised womanhood upon which social order is reliant. This epitomises Cixous' notion of the literary absence of women in the past, and challenges the traditional paradigm of motherhood as Victor represents the textual and social antithesis of how 'the world of "being" can function to the exclusion of the mother ... [on condition that] it is the father then who acts as – is – the mother' (Cixous 360). His failure to sufficiently fulfil his parental role blurs the division that separates the sexes and in doing so, illustrates the deadly cost of replacing the natural mother with a defective substitute who fails to perform the responsibilities of either parent. Furthermore, his destruction of the incomplete female Monster illustrates the various measures taken by representatives of the patriarchal order to maintain control of the female figure in terms of her physical and sexual identity. Ultimately, it is Victor's encompassing of the maternal female that portrays the emotional and psychological strain of the exclusively female experience of postnatal trauma and demonstrates how it can have a coinciding effect on the parent-child bond that can result in the mother's physical or psychological absence from the child.

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