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# "One Feeling in Such a Solitude": Representations of Love and Marriage in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley

**Abstract**
The early nineteenth century was characterized by a dynamic literary discussion and debate over the nature and effects of human relationships. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley, two of the foremost writers of the period, experimented with and drew conclusions about differing images of marriage within their works. Making use of this public literary genre, the couple engaged in a conversation with one another as they explored and refined their views and judgments of relationships including their own. The title of the paper is taken from the seventh chapter of the third volume of Frankenstein, in which Victor Frankenstein, devastated by the loss of his family members and friends and close to death himself, admits to Robert Walton that he has lost a sense of purpose in life.

**Keywords**
Romanticism, Frankenstein, Alastor

**Disciplines**
Comparative Literature | English Language and Literature | Literature in English, British Isles

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# “One Feeling in Such a Solitude”: Representations of Love and Marriage in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley

Jenna Fleming

English 464: Honors Thesis

Professor Goldberg

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

The early nineteenth century was a time of changing and often radicalizing views about the functions, obligations, and effects of human relationships and, in particular, romantic attachment. Philosophers, political and social figures, and writers at the forefront of the Romantic movement raised questions about love and marriage, increasingly challenging and qualifying traditionally held ideas. As more emphasis was placed upon introspection and consideration of the individual, exploration of personal relationships with greater forces such as nature, the earth, and religious concepts became more acceptable and more common. Authors of the period wrote on themes of privacy, identity, and solitude, and with these changes came a shift in concepts of perfection. Rather than pursuing the customary ideal romantic relationship, with the goal of achieving communion with another individual, some poets began to aspire to communion with their own souls. Where partnership and harmony through loving union had once existed, contemplation, intellectualism, and personal growth began to take over as the primary goals expressed in both poetry and prose.

Accompanying this artistic and philosophical change in the ideal was an inevitable shift in views of love, marriage, and companionship. The effects of these conditions upon a person, previously assumed to be positive, redeeming, and beneficial, were increasingly disputed. Any form of human association posed multiple potential risks to one's ability to follow an individual path. Even in seemingly altruistic cases, smaller details complicated and compromised relationships. Selflessness was an important feature of close attachment to others, forcing people to make choices that put family members, friends, or lovers above themselves and thereby denied their true desires. Though this kind of personal sacrifice was generally lauded in Christian tradition, the concept was challenged by some late Enlightenment philosophers and new Romantics, who interpreted imbalanced relationships as detrimental to the parties involved.

They could prevent any single individual from fully realizing his own potential, and furthermore created animosity between partners, generating a system of indebtedness and privilege that led to jealousy and resentment.

The environment of the late eighteenth century was one of political, religious, philosophical, and literary discussion and change. The English Enlightenment inspired a new dynamic in ideas about social structures and regulations, and while those at the forefront of the movement advocated for the most revolutionary ideas, adherents to more conventional beliefs retained a vocal presence at this time.[1] Within the emerging Romantic movement, figures like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge explored the virtues of human relationships and praised the comforts of domesticity. The institution of marriage, they argued, was not by nature detrimental, so long as an individual found a compatible spouse who shared their goals and ideals. Questions regarding the necessity of connections, dangers of imperfect marriages, and ethics of social conventions complicated the debate over the coexistence of love and solitude. The contemporary philosophical conversation was manifested in literary works, as writing was used as an outlet to define, experiment with, and hypothesize further regarding these groundbreaking views.[2]

Among more traditional theorists, marriage represented the highest, purest, and closest form of connection with another person. However, within the increasingly popular thinking espoused by Enlightenment supporters, this legal and romantic union generated perhaps the largest obstacle to the personal pursuit of truth. By its very definition, marriage eliminated the

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[1] Andrew R. L. Cayton, *Love in the Time of Revolution: Transatlantic Literary Radicalism and Historical Change, 1793-1818*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013) 278.
[2] Michelle Levy, "Discovery and the Domestic Affections in Coleridge and Shelley," *SEL Studies in English Literature* 44, no. 4 (2004): 695, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/studies_in_english_literature/v044/44.4levy.html (accessed September 10, 2015).

solitude which was essential to exploration and growth, constricting both spouses and destroying the outward and inward freedoms that were necessary to fully thrive. Impeded and steered by one another, wives and husbands were forced to settle for an indifferent existence. Personal wants and needs were eclipsed by those of a partner, resulting in mutual hurt and dissatisfaction, and impeding the achievement of individual peace and higher personal success. Moreover, if and when attachments became overly limiting, dire results could follow. Barred from effective search for and expression of the desires and direction of their own souls, individuals could become bitter, acerbic, and unstable. The longer these restrictions continued, the more encompassing and affecting their negative influences became. At its worst, human attachment, despite its supposed merits and ascribed objectives of cooperation and unity, had the potential to transform those involved into monstrous versions of themselves. Too long restricted from the freedoms so necessary to mental and emotional health, prosperity, and tranquility, spouses could grow to despise not only one another but also themselves. The only infallible method for preventing these disastrous results was total avoidance of the dangers attachment posed. A radical new ideal arose from the complex debate over individualism carried out at the turn of the nineteenth century. Proponents of this concept espoused a kind of mental and emotional asceticism, achieved by severing ties that bound humans to one another.

Despite extensive discussion and debate of these radical views within scholarly and literary circles, ideas remained largely theoretical, as they were difficult to put into practice. Regardless of the esoteric and intellectually sophisticated nature of these concepts, human nature meant that most people would still seek out romantic and platonic relationships for basic reasons. These might include physical fulfillment, aversion of loneliness, insurance of personal safety, and social or financial security. Making connections over shared experiences and interests

constituted a habitual and essentially unavoidable human behavior, and though opponents might argue against the naturalness of attachment, they could not deny that it was an important part of society. Realistically, personal solitude for the sake of truth was a lofty goal, but one to which aspiration was significantly more pragmatic than achievement. Adherents to this school of thought quickly recognized a basic discrepancy within the theory: the biological, instinctive human desire for relationships was incompatible with the philosophical, but equally natural, need for freedom from attachment.

This central incompatibility between principle and reality gave rise to discussion among Romantic thinkers and writers. Figures like Byron and Keats considered practical application of ideas to real life, asking important questions about the poet's need for solitude, as well as the want of restrictive – and destructive – attachments to others through both friendship and marriage. In some cases, the authors reached different conclusions that they might have attempted to implement in their own lives, with varying levels of success. Others found themselves solely dedicated to theorizing, lacking the desire or ability to attempt execution of their ideas, or possibly prevented from doing so by their irrevocable prior attachments to others. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley typified this new willingness to dispute conventional views of relationships, as well as the challenge of finding an acceptable, achievable balance between ideal and actual forms of love.[3] Though the pair were united in marriage as well as in similar literary pursuits, they used different methods of intellectual exploration to develop distinct judgments about realistic treatments of these issues. Ultimately, through

[3] Nora Crook, "Pecksie and the Elf: Did the Shelleys Couple Romantically?" *Romanticism on the Net* 18 (May 2000): 10, http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2000/v/n18/005911ar.html (accessed September 9, 2015).

explorations of ideas about love within their literary works, Mary and Percy reached different conclusions about the cognitive and moral positions to which marriage can lead.

The Shelleys lived their lives in a delicate balance between the public and private spheres. As writers of poetry and fiction, both used their work to explore questions of philosophy. The freedom of creating unique characters and situations offered opportunities for theorization about the nature of relationships in a way that tangible experience could not. Within their literary works, Percy and Mary were free to espouse their viewpoints on relevant, contemporary issues, leaving their personal opinions and ideas open to public judgment and eliciting mixed reactions from their audiences. Both authors demonstrated marked shifts in perspective throughout their careers, as private life experience led to complication, growth, and maturation of their ideals. Over the course of their relationship, from its earliest stages in 1814 to Percy's tragic death in 1822, the couple communicated with and about each other through writing, treating issues of shared interest and importance.

For the Shelleys, the written word offered opportunities to consider the personal choices they had made, as well as implications of possible alternatives. In both poetry and prose, they postulated ideal relationships, implicitly drawing connections between those images of marriage and their own in a surprisingly candid and open manner. Throughout their time together, Percy and Mary engaged in a literary discussion about the risks, attractions, and effects of romance. While some works can be read as more explicitly corresponding to their own union, even containing events which reference reality and characters that correspond to actual figures, others remained more subtle. Some pieces were purely explicatory, while others represented moments of response, qualification, and intellectual exchange between the two prolific writers as they worked to define the parameters of their own marriage.

Percy, comfortable to study and refine his philosophical ideas in a public literary setting, was the more apt to write theoretically. His lengthy lyrical poem *Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude*, written in late 1815, is an example of his early ideas regarding the juxtaposition of the dual human need for solitude and connection.[4] Writing in light of his elopement with Mary, Percy questioned the ability of love to retain its genuine nature when expanded from a purely private to a vulnerable, shared experience. Examining this central conflict through the imaginary biographical story of a wandering poet, Percy reached a conclusion in which isolation became a heroic quality and attachment posed the risk of corrupting true intention. Mary, opposed to her husband's hypothesis, refuted his work in her 1818 publication of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. In this novel, solitude is shown to have a harmful effect on the individual spirit, with isolation and personal pursuits driving characters to the eventual ruin of themselves and the people they once loved. From Mary's point of view, excessive seclusion was unnatural and ultimately had a dehumanizing effect, unjustly marginalizing the other people in one's life. The broad yet nuanced consideration of relevant philosophical questions she developed in this work, the breadth of issues considered in the relatively short piece, and the multifaceted conclusions she reached are a testament to her deep contemplation of the same ideas. Doubtless her work was influenced not only by her husband's theories, but also by those of her parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, two of the foremost figures of the late English Enlightenment. Along with their writings, the model of their dynamic marriage, Wollstonecraft's early death, and Godwin's later, strained relationship with his daughter served as significant influences on Mary as she composed the novel.[5]

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[4] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 72.
[5] Cayton, *Love in the Time of Revolution*, 313.

*Frankenstein* presented a thorough, perceptive, and distinctly contrasting argument to the one Percy had so meticulously delineated in *Alastor*. He clearly did not take Mary's challenge to his ideals lightly, giving credence to her opinions through devoting considerable time to the contemplation of and reflection upon the points she raised in *Frankenstein*. Several of Percy's later works can be read in conjunction with the novel, addressing similar issues related to interacting themes of love, marriage, freedom, and imprisonment. Favoring the dramatic and poetic genres, he examined love and monstrosity at different extremes in pieces such as the 1818 lyrical poem *To Constantia*, the 1819 play *The Cenci: A Tragedy, in Five Acts*, and even the famous *Lines written in the Bay of Lerici*, completed just a few weeks before his death in 1822.[6] His most direct study perhaps came in 1820's *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts*. In this clear parallel to Mary's tale of *The Modern Prometheus*, Percy qualifies his own treatment of his wife's work. Questioning whether her views are too skeptical, he attempts to create a humane world grounded in the Prometheus myth.[7] Even the title of the play makes reference to the more hopeful nature of its conclusions – a union of ideal love creates freedom, allowing for the unbinding and release of those that it simultaneously envelops. The same concepts formed the basis for Percy's later works, such as *Epipsychidion*, a lyrical poem in which the distinctions between the real and the imaginary become muddled in the search for a perfect, freeing form of love.[8] Despite possible appearances of shifting opinions and unstable ideas, the repetition of motifs of solitude and companionship in application to liberty and

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[6] Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Lines written in the Bay of Lerici," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 480.
[7] Timothy Webb, "The Unascended Heaven: Negatives in *Prometheus Unbound*," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 711
[8] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 390.

imprisonment is a testament to their relevance within the Shelleys' lives. Percy's continuing treatment of the topic demonstrates his genuine consideration and internal debate of the questions Mary presented in her most celebrated work.

Percy composed *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude* in late 1815, during the early stages of his relationship with Mary. This long, lyrical poem explores themes of intellectual isolationism in opposition to human connections. Though Percy likely considered his developing relationship, he nevertheless wrote firmly upon his own views, independently of his burgeoning attachment to his future wife. *Alastor* became a piece in which the poet defined and examined his ideas about the legitimacy of and justifications for romantic connections. The final conclusion expressed in the piece, that isolation was a personal choice tragically necessary for some, posed problems for readers like Mary as it failed to consider the impact an individual's pursuit of solitude could have upon the other people to whom he was previously and inextricably linked. In this way, the poem was important in distinguishing the young Percy Shelley's ideas and opinions and setting the precedent for one aspect of the couple's continuing literary interactions.

Through the voice of an unnamed narrator, *Alastor* chronicles the adventures of a heroic, anonymous Poet on his journey to both physical solitude among the harsh landscape of the Caucasus mountains as well as the metaphysical higher truth found in emotional isolation. Using the account of this man's valiant and tragic pursuit as a model, Percy portrays the virtues of individualism, the benefits of resisting of romantic temptations, and the dangers that attachments to others can bring. The poem's subtitle, "The Spirit of Solitude," refers to the embodiment of this quality within the figure of the poet, "A lovely youth," "Gentle, and brave, and generous,"

who is spurred on in his search for isolation by "mute conference / with his still soul."[9] His determination clearly springs from a source of necessity rather than free choice; he remains "Obedient to high thoughts," even unto suffering, sickness, and his eventual death, believing he will find salvation and comfort with the achievement of his solipsistic goal. Despite the trials of travel and his struggles to function within an environment incompatible with his own world view, the poet continues on in resolve, finally successful in his search for peace at the affecting moment of his death:

> Hope and despair,
> The torturers, slept; no mortal pain or fear
> Marred his repose, the influxes of sense,
> And his own being unalloyed by pain,
> Yet feebler and more feeble, calmly fed
> The stream of thought, till he lay breathing there
> At peace, and faintly smiling – his last sight
> Was the great moon[10]

The structure of *Alastor* relates to the balance between concepts and actuality that many romantic theorists found challenging. Though most of the piece is centered upon the poet, who functions as the representation of solitude, the first three stanzas are spoken by a separate character, the narrator. The section serves as an introduction and builds a narrative structure around the poet and his life story, at the same time creating a degree of separation between the reader and the events described in the poem. The poet's story is notably not told from a first-person point of view; such a structure could have undermined the legitimacy of his quest for

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[9] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 55; 58; 224-225.
[10] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 639-646.

solitude by creating a hypothetical connection to the audience. By inserting the narrator, Percy not only bolsters the legendary status of his main character, but establishes a space for his own authorial voice. If the poet takes the challenging, admirable but impractical role of one who lives a life of solitude, the narrator becomes demonstrative of those like Percy himself, who instead only theorized on the topic. The narrator's appeal that he might give a worthy and true relation of the poet, his life, and his character, speaks to the theorist's desire to fully develop and expound upon the concepts he is unable to carry out in reality, as seen in his application at the end of the third stanza that "my strain / May modulate with murmurs of the air, / And motions of the forests and the sea."[11]

Recurring references to the natural world throughout the piece serve as a reminder of its roots in the Romantic movement. In introducing the story, the narrator invokes the blessings of the "bright bird, insect, or gentle beast."[12] Connections between humanity and the natural world, like those between individuals, are important motifs within *Alastor*. With the opening of the poem's fourth stanza comes the formal transition from an introduction of the narrator to a detailed narrative, and the reader quickly becomes absorbed in the story of the hero. This singular character's constant solitude from his very infancy onwards comes to have an enormous impact on the course of his life. Charmed by and finding his sole pleasures in "Every sight / And sound from the vast earth and ambient air," as a young man he abandons "His cold fireside and alienated home / To seek strange truths in undiscovered lands."[13] His pursuit of knowledge is an obstacle to human connection, but nevertheless offers him a different kind of freedom, liberating him from the potentially restrictive, damaging effects that relationships might have.

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[11] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 45-47.
[12] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Line 13.
[13] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 68-69; 76-77.

The scene for the poet's contemplation of and interactions with his private thoughts is quietly set in "lone and silent hours, / When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness."[14] The juxtaposition between loneliness and love remains the conflict at the center of the poem: while idealistic isolation can provide the most conducive path to peace, part of the poet's tragedy comes from the sad fact that "no mourning maiden… no lorn bard / Breathed o'er his dark fate."[15] His defining characteristic is that "He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude," his imagined life posing a perfect opportunity for Percy Shelley's speculations on the results of a lack of human relationships.

Throughout *Alastor*, solitude, the motivating factor in the Poet's journey through hazardous and desolate terrain, is represented as the key to knowledge, vision, and insight. The narrator fails to specify to what end the hero pursues the peace he so desperately seeks, allowing a sense of mystery to accrue against this enigmatic and irresistible higher truth. Early on in his journey, the poet is encouraged by brief moments of clarity he experiences. The narrator relates that as he explored the sites of ancient civilizations, "meaning on his vacant mind / Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw / The thrilling secrets of the birth of time."[16] As he progresses further away from civilization and human connection, he finds even greater understandings of religious concepts, the earth's natural condition, and unexpectedly, love itself. By removing himself from outside influences and communing with nature, he is able to explore his own mind and hear "the universe / Tell where these living thoughts reside."[17] His increasingly isolated condition, though it takes a physical toll upon his body, is uplifting to his mind; as he nears the

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[14] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 29-30.
[15] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 55, 58-59.
[16] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 126-128.
[17] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 511-512.

end of his journey he achieves a more complete grasp of the knowledge for which he has been searching so persistently, symbolized through a strengthening stream running parallel to his path:

> Calm, he still pursued
>
> The stream, that with a larger volume now
>
> Rolled through the labyrinthine dell; and there
>
> Fretted a path through its descending curves
>
> With its wintry speed….
>
> Mid toppling stones, black gulfs and yawning caves,
>
> Whose windings gave ten thousand various tongues
>
> To the loud stream.[18]

Regardless of what the poet's unidentified questions might truly be, he earnestly seeks their answers in seclusion, "Following his eager soul" to a place of undisturbed private contemplation.[19]

While the narrator mourns the loss of the poet, the inevitability of the hero's fate is one of his defining qualities. His choice to pursue seclusion is tragic but necessary, as his desire for knowledge, a power greater than himself, remains the driving force behind his journey from its start to end. From his birth, his intellect and his heart remain in opposition to association with others, leading him intuitively inward and physically away from civilization and human connections. Even though he experiences moments of tranquility and near-satisfaction as he continues further, he returns always to this compelling influence, the source of which he struggles to define:

> But on his heart its solitude returned,

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[18] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 539-550.
[19] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Line 311.

And he forbore. Not the strong impulse hid

In those flushed cheeks, bent eyes, and shadowy frame

Had yet performed its ministry: it hung

Upon his life, as lightning in a cloud

Gleams, hovering ere it vanish, ere the floods

Of night close over it.[20]

The weakening state of the poet's body is not enough to weaken his resolve. The physical and mental fatigue he experiences is not an obstacle to his quest for solitude, and he moves "As one / Roused by some joyous madness from the couch / Of fever… / Forgetful of the grave."[21] His lack of corporeal concerns suggests the purity and sublimity of his pursuit, which brings him to a level of greater knowledge that justifies the simultaneous sacrifice of his physical form.

Percy Shelley clearly acknowledged the tragedy, pain, and hardship of intellectual isolationism, even as he idealized the situation of the solitary poet-philosopher. The peace and understanding the *Alastor* hero eventually finds does have a sorrowful side; though his lack of attachment is on some level a conscious choice, it leaves him unsuited for and unable to form connections to others. The poet suffers for his knowledge, inciting the reader's sympathy, but his struggles nevertheless hold an inherent nobility that coincides with the dignity of his quest:

For, as fast years flow away,

The smooth brow gathers, and the hair grows thin

And white, and where irradiate dewy eyes

Had shone, gleam stony orbs:—so from his steps

Bright flowers departed, and the beautiful shade

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[20] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 414-419.
[21] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 517-519; 520.

Of the green groves, with all their odorous winds

And musical motions.[22]

The experience of the *Alastor* hero leads him to a solipsistic, solemn state of existence, but as he is so far removed from human connections, his decisions and actions have virtually no impact upon others. The detrimental effects of his solitude are restricted to the poet himself, with other characters, who claim a minor presence in the poem, remaining only marginally effected by their fleeting interactions with him.

The focus of the piece remains so concentrated upon the poet that consideration of others is, for the narrator, essentially unnecessary. The general absence of relationships from the poet's life means that he is connected to other people only in indirect ways; in the introduction the narrator describes these associations as distant, even imaginary: "Strangers have wept to hear his passionate notes, / And virgins, as unknown he past, have pined / And wasted for fond love of his wild eyes."[23] The closest the poet comes to a true interaction is through his passing encounter with "an Arab maiden" during his travels.[24] This woman is fascinated with and attracted to him, as she

spread her matting for his couch, and stole

From duties and repose to tend his steps:—

Enamoured, yet not daring for deep awe

To speak her love:—and watched his nightly sleep,

Sleepless herself, to gaze upon his lips

Parted in slumber, whence the regular breath

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[22] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 533-539.
[23] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 61-63.
[24] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Line 129.

Of innocent dreams arose[25]

The account of the meeting between the poet and the maiden functions as a way to emphasize the honor of his intentions and his commitment to solitude. Though he might ostensibly have stayed in Arabia and pursued a romantic relationship with this woman, the poet remains unwaveringly set upon his course, illustrating his strength of character and revealing where his true desires lie. In failing to consider this woman or any other character as more than a minor plot device, Percy does not address the question of the wider, marginalizing effects one person's isolation might have.[26] In her interpretation of *Alastor*, Mary Shelley acknowledged this inattention as a major issue within the poem. Though she felt that isolation could have significant merits, she expressed doubts about its humanity, naturalness, and morality, unsure if it could ever be successfully achieved as the purely personal experience that her husband had portrayed. The image of the idealistic, heroic pursuit of solitude that Percy defined in this formative piece continued to influence the philosophies, opinions, and writings of both authors.

Though Percy might have been comfortable with the neatly-drawn conclusions he reached in *Alastor*, Mary raised questions about the simplicity of assumptions expressed in the piece. While she shared the opinion that human attachments could prove dangerous to individuals, her understanding of relationships, romantic and otherwise, was more nuanced than Percy's sharply divided view. Mary took issue with the glorification of the defiant, heroic posture attributed to figures like the *Alastor* poet, interpreting the pursuit of extreme isolation as

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[25] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 131-137.
[26] Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, "The Transgressive Double Standard: Shelleyan Utopianism and Feminist Social History," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 610.

contributing to an altered view of the self. Lack of connections to others removed the important checks upon ambition, conceit, and immorality that respect and love for others naturally provided. Despite her reservations about complete solitude, Mary exhibited extreme caution in dispensing approval of relationships, specifically marriages. Familiar with gender issues thanks to the interests and writings of her parents, Mary was particularly concerned with the status of and freedoms allocated to married women. Like her husband, though for very different reasons, she expressed reservations about the potentially restrictive effects of the institution. Constantly wary of the marginalization of women, a quality of both extreme isolation and attachment, Mary found it difficult to approve fully of either option.

These complex ideas regarding relationships are realized in Mary's 1818 novel and best-known work, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*. Though often noted for its status as a revolutionary work of the science fiction genre, *Frankenstein* is a character-driven narrative which addresses significant human problems. The absence of bonds between individuals, or those that are improperly formed, represent major obstacles to the characters, and the story contains several examples of the destructive and marginalizing effects that failed relationships can have. Several types of connections are examined in *Frankenstein*, including friendships, romantic involvement and marriage, and dynamics within families. The relationship between a creator and his creation is at the center of the novel, illustrated not only by the turbulent interactions of Victor Frankenstein and his monster, but also the implicit challenges Victor poses to his own creator, as he seeks personal glory through relentless and reckless pursuit of his desires. Through the lens of deeply flawed characters in an unorthodox situation, Mary Shelley used *Frankenstein* to develop her own ideas and challenge those of others regarding the limits and dangers of human selfishness.

While romance is not a prominent feature of the novel, marriage is nevertheless a driving force of its action. Victor's story, related to the reader by the ship captain Robert Walton, opens with a recollection of his childhood and family history. In reference to his father, Frankenstein recalls that "the circumstances of his marriage illustrate his character," demonstrating the importance the institution holds for him in influencing an individual's personality, as well as the course of one's life.[27] Victor expresses admiration and appreciation for the features of his parents' marriage, and in his relations to Walton portrays it as mutually beneficial. Nevertheless, he emphasizes its qualities of safety and security, almost to the point of subordination on his mother's part. Victor relates that his father "came like a protecting spirit" to the young and destitute but resolute Caroline Beaufort, "who committed herself to his care," and while the couple waited several years to marry, from the start their relationship was imbalanced.[28] Victor remembers his mother as a woman of "fortitude and benignity," who "possessed a mind of an uncommon mould," but in his descriptions of his childhood, she remains a background character. Caroline's presence is constantly overshadowed by her husband's influence, as he makes major decisions about family life, the children's educations, and Victor's move to Ingolstadt seemingly on his own. Victor recalls that "my father thought it necessary… that I should be made acquainted with other customs than those of my native country," seemingly in contradiction to previous statements about his mother's authority.[29] His claims to a happy and idealistic childhood are prominently influenced by the positive example of marriage set by his parents. The inequality in this relationship, apparent to the reader, but invisible to Victor, will come to damage his future attitudes and actions.

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[27] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*, 2nd ed., ed. Susan J. Wolfson (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2007), 18.
[28] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 18.
[29] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 25.

The death of Victor's mother is a pivotal event of his youth, and he regards his loss as "the first misfortune of my life… an omen, as it were, of my future misery."[30] Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein represents a positive force in Victor's early life. Her benevolence and the extent of her compassion for others would have proved a beneficial model for Victor had she lived, possibly even preventing the determined pursuit of individualism that eventually brings about his ruin. However, the very same consideration for others that sets her apart leads to the illness that ends her life.

From the time of his early childhood, Victor's mother supported his future marriage to his cousin Elizabeth Lavenza, brought into the Frankenstein household upon her own mother's death. Caroline believed that Elizabeth, a "most beautiful child… of a gentle and affectionate disposition," offered to Victor the same opportunity for a happy marriage that his parents had ostensibly enjoyed.[31] Satisfied in and dedicated to her own contented situation, she became determined to secure the same for her son, "a design which she never found reason to repent."[32] Under her guidance, Elizabeth grew into a "lively and animated" young woman whom "every one adored," for her sweet and caring nature. According to Victor, "no one could better enjoy liberty, yet no one could submit with more grace than she did to constraint and caprice," and the two seemed a perfect match, "strangers to any species of disunion and dispute."[33]

Though he was a serious child and studious young man who displayed a propensity to solitude, Victor's childhood friendship with Elizabeth was clearly beneficial to him, adding vibrancy and happiness to his life through the sense of companionship it offered. In depicting this close early connection as a positive force, Mary Shelley countered the experience of the

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[30] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 25.
[31] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 19.
[32] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 20.
[33] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 20.

*Alastor* poet, whose "infancy was nurtured" by only "The fountains of divine philosophy," rather than the warmth of human interaction.[34] Despite the prospective happiness an eventual marriage to Elizabeth could bring, several influences, including Victor's overwhelming desire for solitude and his mother's inability to realize her goal, prevent the couple from achieving the idyllic state of matrimony anticipated by all involved.

Caroline's commitment to securing her son's future leads her to an act of self-sacrifice that has a tragically opposite effect. Shortly before Victor's departure for the University of Ingolstadt, Elizabeth is struck by scarlet fever, and in Caroline's concern for her son's future bride, she ignores advice to "refrain from attending upon her," visiting her surrogate daughter "long before the danger of infection was past."[35] Though the younger woman recovers quickly, the elder is unable to overcome the illness, and on her deathbed expresses to Victor and Elizabeth a final time her "firmest hopes of future happiness… placed on the prospect of your union."[36] Victor is devastated by the loss of his mother, but comforted somewhat by her expressions of love for her family and the peaceful nature of her passing. Mary Shelley herself lost her mother as an infant, and though she had no recollection of the experience, her own feelings of resignation might be reflected in Victor's observance upon the "bitterness of grief" and his mournful question, "from whom has not that rude hand rent away some dear connexion"?[37]

Regardless of his somewhat stoic claims in the wake of his mother's passing, it is clear that Victor's views of marriage, and indeed any type of personal relationship, have changed as a result of her sacrifice in his interest. Troubled by his first glimpse of how strong connections to

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[34] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 66; 69.
[35] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 26.
[36] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 26.
[37] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 26.

others can prove detrimental to an individual, he departs for university, where he finds himself "indulged in the most melancholy reflections," comparing his former state of familial companionship to the isolation he experiences in his new city.[38] In reflecting upon his time at Ingolstadt, Victor remarks upon his "first two or three days spent almost in solitude," a practice which quickly becomes habitual as he finds himself increasingly engaged in his studies. Spurred on by his academic success and residually fearful of forming attachments that may result in emotional damage, he is devoted entirely to science, recalling later to Walton that during this period of his life, "natural philosophy, and particularly chemistry, in the most comprehensive sense of the term, became nearly my sole occupation."[39] Frankenstein's pursuit of the sciences places him in a position similar to that of the *Alastor* poet, who forsakes all connections and civilization as a whole to in his quest for secluded truth:

> Following his eager soul, the wanderer
> Leaped in the boat, he spread his cloak aloft
> On the bare mast, and took his lonely seat,
> And felt the boat speed o'er the tranquil sea
> Like a torn cloud before the hurricane.[40]

Though Victor's experience belongs to the realms of the mental and emotional, rather than taking the form of a physical flight, he likewise completes a kind of journey, abandoning his previous hopes for his and Elizabeth's mutual happiness through matrimonial fulfillment in favor of his own interests.

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[38] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 27.
[39] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 31.
[40] Alastor, Lines 311-315.

As he later recalls to Walton in language colored by retroactive understanding, Victor increasingly spent his time "In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a gallery and staircase."[41] Years after his experience, he is finally able to recognize the effect this solitude had upon him, and the dangerous decisions to which his isolation led. In total disregard of others' interests and concerns, he severs contact with his family and close friends at home in Geneva, becoming absorbed in his studies and finding that "the more fully I entered into the science, the more exclusively I pursued it for his own sake."[42] In her description of Victor's manner of isolation, Mary further challenges Percy's glorification of personal solitude as communicated in *Alastor*. Unlike the poet, who, looking for comfort and communion in the natural world, "sought in Nature's dearest haunt, some bank / Her cradle, and his sepulchre," Victor became preoccupied with gaining the respect and admiration of those around him: "My ardour was indeed the astonishment of the students; and my proficiency, that of the masters."[43] Victor does live to regret his actions, recognizing the eventual widespread effects of his self-centered perspective. In contrast to the ideal situation Percy creates for his poet, who is brought to a peaceful and fulfilling end, Mary constructs a setting full of human imperfections and challenges, which Victor is, perhaps more realistically, unable to overcome.

Left to his own devices, Victor is unchecked by the benevolent, guiding power that relationships with others might offer him. As he devolves into solitude, he comes to disregard human systems in general, abandoning the standards of religion, common sense, and basic morality as he continues further in following his own inherent desires for personal glory. His

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[41] Frankenstein, 35.
[42] Frankenstein, 31.
[43] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 429-430; Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 31.

fascination takes on an unhealthy and detrimental character as he pursues the origins of life and death: "I saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted; I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life; I saw how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain."[44] Released from care for or connections to others, Victor loses perspective in his view of himself, coming to believe in the supremacy of his own limitless knowledge and taking on the role designated for him in the novel's subtitle, that of *The Modern Prometheus*.

*Frankenstein* raises major questions regarding the nature of humanity and monstrosity, and the attribution of these qualities to its main characters is a subject of considerable debate.[45] Nevertheless, despite the monstrosity of his actions, decisions, and, perhaps his nature, Victor Frankenstein retains some significantly human qualities, which are noticeably absent from the character of the poet in *Alastor*. Percy's hero, whose "flushed cheeks, bent eyes, and shadowy frame" are dedicated entirely and flawlessly to the solitude on which his heart rests, does not provide an accurate model of the true human condition.[46] Conversely, Victor Frankenstein's capacity for personal failures, as well as his ability to recognize and regret his mistakes, albeit far too late to repair the damage he has done, makes him a more complex and lifelike character. The differences between the two can be explained, to a degree, through the aims of the authors; in writing *Alastor* and *Frankenstein*, the Shelleys retained very different purposes and outlooks. While Percy intended his poem to explore an ideal, Mary used her novel to question its veracity and application, reaching the conclusion that the absence of connection led individuals down

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[44] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 32.
[45] Theresa M. Kelley, "Romantic Temporality, Contingency, and Mary Shelley," *English Literary History* 75, no. 3 (Fall 2008), http://www.jstor.org/stable/27654628 (Accessed September 2, 2015): 626.
[46] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 414-416.

dangerous paths, as exemplified in Victor's response to the horrific achievement of his previously exalted goal.

From the moment of the creature's inception, Victor acknowledges it to be a disaster, though his struggles with accepting accountability for his act of creation continue over the course of the entire novel and remain unresolved at its end. His instinctive reaction is one of dismay and remorse, and even without proper time to reflect upon the realization of the work of "nearly two years," he identifies the infusion of "a spark of being into the lifeless thing" as a "catastrophe."[47] Though he concedes that he "had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation," Frankenstein relates that immediately, "the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart."[48] This statement, though similar in its themes of solitude and close connections with death, comes in contrast to the concepts expressed in *Alastor*, as the poet's eyes behold

> distinct in the dark depth
> Of that still fountain; as the human heart,
> Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave,
> Sees its own treacherous likeness there.[49]

In the midst of his isolation, Percy's *Alastor* poet is ultimately successful in his search for "treacherous and tremendous calm," and while this language might suggest continuing anxieties about the unfinished journey and fate of the idealist, he nevertheless finds respite along the

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[47] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 37.
[48] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 37.
[49] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 471-474.

way.[50] Conversely, Victor Frankenstein remains unable to attain peace, constantly haunted by his mistakes and in bitter refusal to take responsibility for them.

Victor's flawed perspective in the wake of his extreme isolation has an even greater, unintended effect on those around him. This new pattern of privileging the self takes root soon after the animation of the creature, when Victor's childhood friend Henry Clerval arrives in Ingolstadt for a visit, confused and concerned at the lack of communication since his departure for university. Finding Victor distraught and irrational following the monster's creation and subsequent escape, Clerval nurses his friend back to health through a life-threatening fever. Frankenstein later recalls to Walton that "He knew that I could not have a more kind and attentive nurse than himself; and, firm in the hope he felt of my recovery, he did not doubt that, instead of doing harm, he performed the kindest action that he could."[51] The care and attention exercised by Victor's friend may have healed him physically, but did little to change his ideas and newfound habits regarding human connection. Believing in his own inability to be understood or accepted by others and fearing the potential constraints relationships could bring, Victor continues to reject his former associations. His inability to see past his own ideas, concerns, and later fears results in the marginalization of those he had previously cared about, including his family and close friends, but most specifically his cousin and fiancée. Of all the relationships explored in the novel, the one between Victor and Elizabeth is perhaps the most relevant to Mary Shelley's personal interests and anxieties. The divergent development of the two characters, as well as the tragic end to their relationship, reflects on Mary's concerns about her own situation and makes a larger statement about the social disadvantages women of the early nineteenth century suffered.

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[50] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Line 386.
[51] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 41.

Victor, always fond of his cousin as a child, recognizes her upon their reunion following his return from university as "a woman in stature and expression of countenance, which was uncommonly lovely."[52] Within the novel, Elizabeth functions as an exemplary type of woman: she is kind, intelligent, and sensitive, with charity and concern for others as her defining qualities. After the death of Victor's mother and his departure to school, she looks after his father and brothers, demonstrating her compassion by offering a home and position to the orphaned and destitute Justine Moritz. Throughout his physical and emotional absence from her, Elizabeth remains steadfast to Victor, as demonstrated in the letter he receives while in recovery from his severe illness. In reference to Clerval's claims of Victor's improvement, she writes, "I eagerly hope that you will confirm this intelligence soon in your own hand-writing; for indeed, Victor, we are all very miserable on this account. Relieve us from this fear, and we shall be the happiest creatures in the world."[53] In this situation, despite her personal worries, Elizabeth places Victor's safety and security above her own, seeking reassurance for the benefit of the entire Frankenstein family. In considering his response, Victor resolves to "write instantly, and relieve them from the anxiety they must feel."[54] Though his immediate intentions are good, he notes that "I wrote, and this exertion greatly fatigued me," demonstrating his persistent preoccupation with his own concerns, whether conscious or not.

Victor's return to Geneva, intended as a happy occasion, is made tragic by the death of his youngest brother William at the hands of the monster. The entire family, including Victor, is devastated by the news, but Elizabeth in particular exhibits a significant change from her previous vivacity: "She had become grave, and often conversed of the inconstancy of fortune,

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[52] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 56.
[53] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 42.
[54] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 45.

and the instability of human life."[55] In this way, the negligence resulting from Victor's desire for removal from others is manifested in a situation that is directly harmful to Elizabeth.[56] Through her character, Mary illustrates the way that women suffer when the men to whom they are attached become preoccupied with their own pursuits and desires. Her description of Elizabeth recalls that of *Alastor*'s "Arab maiden," who is left "Sleepless… wildered, and wan, and panting," for her devotion to the solitary poet.[57] It remains ambiguous whether Mary equated herself with this marginalized female figure, as in the very act of writing *Frankenstein* she claimed a greater degree of agency for herself, making a statement on contemporary philosophies of gender relations. Regardless of her intentions, as the novel continues, Elizabeth and Victor follow diverging yet parallel paths, further illustrating the isolating effects individualism can have on more than just the central figure it concerns.

As the young couple copes with the second unexpected death in their family, Victor's distress inspires a corresponding level of sympathy in Elizabeth. She expresses her worries, confessing to her cousin that while "These events have affected me, God knows how deeply; but I am not so wretched as you are. There is an expression of despair, and sometimes of revenge, in your countenance, that makes me tremble."[58] In a moment of foreshadowing her ultimate fate, and in a parallel to the one that met Victor's mother, Elizabeth declares to him, "I would sacrifice my life to your peace."[59] In his refusal or inability to renounce the despair and revenge that drives him misguidedly onward, Victor again forces the personal sacrifice of a woman who

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[55] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 67.
[56] P. D. Fleck, "Mary Shelley's Notes to Shelley's Poems and 'Frankenstein,'" *Studies in Romanticism* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1967), http://www.jstor.org/stable/25599693 (accessed September 10, 2015), 249.
[57] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor*, Lines 129; 135; 139.
[58] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 67.
[59] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 67.

cares deeply about him. Eventually, his behavior proves that even he does not benefit from his determined pursuit of the goals he believes are so necessary to survival.

This habit is illustrated once more as the family travels to Chamounix in an attempt to regain the peace of which William's death has robbed them. Victor's desire for isolation manifests itself in an obvious physical manner during this trip, and he recalls that:

> I sometimes joined Elizabeth, and exerted myself to point out to her the various beauties of the scene. I often suffered my mule to lag behind, and indulged in the misery of reflection. At other times I spurred on the animal before my companions, that I might forget them, the world, and more than all, myself. When at a distance, I alighted, and threw myself on the grass, weighted down by horror and despair.[60]

In his desire for total separation from his family members, Victor allows himself to become absorbed by feelings of desperation, in turn creating more obstacles to potentially beneficial connections. When he finally arrives at his destination, delayed by his powerlessness against the solitude he has created for himself, he finds that his "father and Elizabeth were very much fatigued."[61] Through this clear and almost literal representation, Mary Shelley demonstrates to her reader the isolating and detrimental effects one person's journey to solitude can have upon others, no matter their original intentions.

Victor and Elizabeth remain unwed with the conclusion of his studies at Ingolstadt. Affected by the loss of his mother and mindful of the sacrifice she carried out for his sake, Victor remains wary of the institution. As the singular previous example available to him, that of his parents' relationship, ended in her death, he regards marriage as a generally destructive force.

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[60] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 69.
[61] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 69.

Specifically to his own situation, he feels that it poses a danger to the delicate balance in which he hangs, perpetually at the mercy of the monster. For these reasons, as well as his insubstantial hopes that "some event might happen which would restore me to… peace and happiness: my promise might be fulfilled, and the monster have departed, or some accident might occur to destroy him," Victor delays his marriage to Elizabeth by two years.[62] Within this space of time, as he travels Europe, seeking increasing isolation as he contemplates the monster's demands for a companion and is forced to deal with the death of his closest friend, his fiancée becomes progressively further overlooked.

Distance from Elizabeth makes the vaguely impending marriage even less of a concern for Victor, until she is compelled to write a desperate letter, confessing to him "that when I saw you last autumn so unhappy, flying to solitude, from the society of every creature, I could not help supposing that you might regret our connexion, and believe yourself bound in honor to fulfil the wishes of your parents."[63] In an ironic contrast to Elizabeth's own "airy dreams of futurity," in which Victor has "been my constant friend and companion," he does indeed regret their connection, as well as any connection that represents the potential constraints of human attachment.[64] Her fears that she may "increase [his] miseries ten-fold, by being an obstacle to [his] wishes," will come true, though in a way that Victor, still blinded by his own interests, is unable to foresee.

Finally becoming resigned to the institution as "the seal to [his] fate," Victor agrees to the marriage, misinterpreting the monster's repeated threat, "I shall be with you on your wedding-

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[62] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 118.
[63] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 147.
[64] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 147.

night."[65] Outwardly, he seems to care for Elizabeth's happiness, but simultaneously lacks the presence of mind to take the same concerns for her safety. Remembering his catastrophically ironic prediction in advance of the wedding, Victor recalls his fears that "on that night would the daemon employ every art to destroy me, and tear me from the glimpse of happiness which promised partly to console my sufferings."[66] Accustomed to his view of the world solely in relation to himself, he remains so firm in his belief that the creature intends for his death that he is unable to fathom the danger of the situation. In this way, Victor's previous, uninhibited quest for isolation in the pursuit of his scientific goals has returned to haunt him in the same way the creature has. Even in the wake of his wife's murder and the genuine "agony of despair" it brings him, Victor is made most miserable by the knowledge that the creature had once again "eluded" him, "and, running with the swiftness of lighting, plunged into the lake."[67] Notably, in the midst of the emotional anguish he suffers, it is the thought of his own further suffering that finally brings Victor to tears. In contemplation of returning from his honeymoon to Geneva alone, when his family had expected to welcome back the happily married couple, he "wept for a long time; but my thoughts rambled to various subjects, reflecting on my misfortunes, and their cause."[68] Though this cause is never openly identified, Mary Shelley makes it plain to her reader that, through a series of poor decisions centered on the reckless pursuit of his desires, Frankenstein himself brought about the destruction of his relationships with the people he had loved.

The premature end of his marriage is representative of the collapse of Victor's future; with Elizabeth's death comes the loss of any hopes he might have harbored for future happiness.

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[65] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 150.
[66] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 148.
[67] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 155.
[68] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 155.

She had offered to him the potential for redemption through human connection and the achievement of a successful, mutually beneficial marriage similar to that of his parents. However, the ruin of his future, combined with the quiet death of his disconsolate father, sends Victor into a further spiral of melancholy and misery. Reflecting upon the "past misfortunes" of his life, he comes to the conclusion that their cause is "the monster whom I had created, the miserable daemon whom I had sent abroad into the world for my destruction."[69] Though he continues to blame the intermediary force of the creature, rather than taking full personal responsibility for his own despair, Victor comes to recognize that his own monstrosity, propelled forward by his Promethean preoccupations and unchecked ambition, has played a major role in accelerating the general decline of his life.

By the end of his story, related somewhat paradoxically at the beginning of the novel, Frankenstein has at least learned to regret the search for solitude to which he had been so dedicated in his younger days. His rejection of human attachment is replaced, as Robert Walton relates to his sister, with an appreciation for any kind of interaction with others: "if any one performs an act of kindness towards him, or does him any the most trifling service, his whole countenance is lighted up, as it were, with a beam of benevolence and sweetness that I never saw equalled."[70] In allowing this small form of redemption to Victor, as well as the comfort of a peaceful death having communicated his story and lesson, Mary Shelley prevents *Frankenstein* from becoming simply a tragic, cautionary tale of misfortune brought on by selfish individualism. In his parallel role to the *Alastor* poet, Victor characterizes the realistic dangers of senseless isolation and the denial of natural relationships. He remains a flawed individual who continually fails, even in his last moments, to fully accept or learn from his mistakes. The

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[69] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 156.
[70] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 13.

connection, however brief, he forms with Robert Walton, and his desire to dissuade the younger man from following a similar path, shows that Victor retains some form of his humanity. Mary suggests that even in his failures, he has perhaps gained some wisdom, as he earnestly relates to Walton the basic concept he has gained through his suffering:

> A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not benefitting the human mind.[71]

The same year *Frankenstein* was published, Percy Shelley began the composition of another piece instrumental to the literary conversation he held with his wife. *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts*, published in August 1820, represents his creative response to the challenge Mary posed through the characters, plot, and conclusions of her novel. Despite its fantastical subject matter, basic realism in the treatment of the human condition remained at the heart of *Frankenstein*. The example of Victor's isolation, which led him to loneliness, mental distortion, and the inability to make vital connections to others, formed the basis of Mary's statement about the merits of personal relationships. Within *Prometheus Unbound*, Percy attempted to qualify these ideas, as well as his own expressed in *Alastor*, about knowledge, love, and imprisonment. In contrast to his earlier poem, which examined an

[71] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 36.

idealistic representation of solitude, the play considers and accepts the concept that human relationships can take altruistic forms. Creating his own context of mythological characters and an imagined setting, Percy posited the theoretical epitome of marriage, exploring its origin, the identities of the parties involved, and results to which it could lead. In essence, the drama conveys his appreciation for Mary's argument, expresses reflection upon her ideals, and signifies engagement of her theories for his own literary purposes.

The basic plot of the four-act play rests on a complex mythology populated by original and adapted legendary characters, particularly Prometheus. The connection between Percy's choice of a hero and the image of Victor Frankenstein as "*The Modern Prometheus"* was certainly not accidental. This shared reference made the link between the two pieces all the more clear, while also drawing attention to the disparate fates of their main characters. The play's title, *Prometheus Unbound*, likewise suggests a movement towards greater freedom, achieved by love and realized in the hero's marriage to a woman who helps him to grow and progress personally. Though much of the dialogue takes on a poetic quality, with characters ruminating on various Romantic concepts, the action itself sees the overthrow of the tyrannical god Jupiter and the freeing of his former prisoner Prometheus within the first two acts.[72] The second half of the play explores the process by which the hero and his bride, Asia, are emotionally reconnected through love, find one another, and are united in an exhilarating and harmonious marriage. The absolute power of this force is recognized through characters' words and actions in a model so highly developed from that expressed in Percy's *Alastor*. Even the ambiguously-motivated

[72] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 203.

figure Demogorgon, who at times serves as the voice of practicality and warning within the play, must acknowledge the strength, influence, and revelatory quality of love:

> If the Abysm
> Could vomit forth its secrets: - But a voice
> Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;
> For what would it avail to bid thee gaze
> On the revolving world? What to bid speak
> Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance, and Change? To these
> All things are subject but eternal Love.[73]

At the opening of the play, Prometheus finds himself in a desperate situation, observing to the relentless Jupiter, "me, who am thy foe, eyeless in hate, / Hast thou made reign and triumph, to thy scorn, / O'er mine own misery and thy vain revenge."[74] Trapped by one individual's selfishness and vanity, the hero feels "Faint, like one mingled in entwining love, / Yet 'tis not pleasure."[75] Traditionally the champion of humankind, Prometheus is characterized early on as a cerebral character, perceptive to the struggles experienced by those who are, like him, under Jupiter's oppression.[76] Taking direction from logic rather than emotion, he claims "I am king over myself, and rule / The torturing and conflicting throngs within."[77] The highly structured way in which he views the world allows Prometheus to recognize his imprisonment and the effects of the curse that has been placed upon him. Still, he fails to grasp the emotional ramifications, and does not fully understand that while Jupiter still rules, "In each human heart

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[73] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 2.4.114-120.
[74] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 1.1.11-13.
[75] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 1.1.148-149.
[76] Stuart Curran, "Shelley and the End(s) of Ideology," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 600.
[77] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 1.1.493-494.

terror survives…. / The wise want love; and those who love want wisdom; / And all best things are thus confused to ill."[78]

The challenge of finding a space in which love and wisdom can coexist, a crucial subject in many of the Shelley's works, becomes Prometheus's central aim in the later acts of the play. However, it quickly becomes apparent to the other characters and the reader that the hero, restricted by his own interpretations, will be unable to succeed on his own. Prometheus is able to appreciate the need for unity between the two distinct concepts only through the influence and teachings of another character – his intended bride Asia, whose person and actions are chronicled in the play's second act. In contrast to both the authoritarian Jupiter and analytical Prometheus, the goddess is portrayed as the personification of love and passion. Her overwhelming goodness is celebrated by the other characters in the play, and her tender nature offers to Prometheus the ability to find the greater understanding that he seeks. Throughout Act II, Asia wanders the fantastical realms, followed always by "the delicate spirit / That guides the earth through heaven," which her sister Panthea observes "came / Each leisure hour to drink the liquid light / Out of her eyes."[79] Like the character of Elizabeth Lavenza in *Frankenstein*, Asia presents the opportunity of gaining greater insight through loving human connection, rather than simple intellectualism:

> Like the spark nursed in ember,
>
> The last look Love remembers,
>
> Like a diamond which shines
>
> On the dark wealth of mines,

[78] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 1.1.620; 627-628.
[79] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 3.4.6-7; 16-18.

A spell is treasured but for thee alone.[80]

While the parallels between the two characters are easily drawn, Prometheus's motivations and choices differ significantly from those of Frankenstein. Ultimately, the hero's willingness to make himself vulnerable to a benevolent outside influence allows him to gain greater insight.

Following the miraculous fall of Jupiter in the play's third act and the realization of the piece's title, the hero is finally able to connect with "wisdom, courage, and long suffering love," and through his marriage to Asia becomes united with "the form they animate."[81] The union of the two is celebrated as mutually beneficial, as both spouses foster insight in one another: her loving nature vivifies his intellectualism, while his powers of perception add form and direction to the "voice of Love in dreams" that emits from her.[82]

The relationship between the characters motivates them in becoming increasingly alike, developing into greater versions of themselves in a way would be impossible without the acknowledgement, appreciation, and adoption of one another's qualities. Together with the other characters, they rejoice in their union as bringing perfection to

Thou Earth, calm Empire of a happy Soul,

Sphere of divinest shapes and harmonies,

Beautiful orb! gathering as thou dost roll

The Love which paves thy path along the skies[83]

While thoughts of this same unifying process had terrified the *Alastor* poet and appalled Victor Frankenstein, these characters possessed flawed understandings of the ways in which human attachment affects the individual. Prometheus's willingness and even enthusiasm to

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[80] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 2.3.84-88.
[81] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 3.3.2-3.
[82] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 4.1.65.
[83] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 4.1.519-522.

accept marriage as a beneficial connecting force illustrates a change in Percy Shelley's personal opinions. Embracing and expounding upon the ideas set forth in *Frankenstein*, he expressed a view of marriage that furthered the cause of the individual more than isolation and ambition ever could. Though he would continue to treat the same theme in poems of later years, of all his works *Prometheus Unbound* came the nearest to achievement of the intellectual challenge Mary's novel set out for him. The positive, constructive, and loving union between Prometheus and Asia demonstrates Percy's interpretation of the ideal combination of love and wisdom, inspired by the theories his wife had envisioned. *Prometheus Unbound*, one of the most important instances of literary interaction between the two authors, remains as Percy's celebration of the insight he gained from Mary's reading of his work.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley represent two of the most eminent, revolutionary, and enduring voices of the early nineteenth-century literary conversation. While each addressed a wide variety of relevant themes and contemporary issues, the couple's personal interactions as expressed in their works provide an opportunity for insight into their individual and shared views on human relationships. When examined in relation to one another, pieces as diverse as Percy's *Alastor* and *Prometheus Unbound* and Mary's *Frankenstein* reveal their interconnected nature and provide important details about the intellectual exchange between the two authors. Characterized by a perpetual sense of exploration, contradiction, and refinement, the Shelley's writings communicate their continually changing and developing ideas about love.

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