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Keith R. Swaney
Gettysburg College
Class of 2004

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Abstract

Is man inherently good or evil? Nineteenth century Romantics, inspired by the doctrine of Jean Jacques Rousseau, hypothesized that man is a product of his or her environment. Middle class society imputed the mother as the gateway by which a child learns to become a model human being. This theory held that mothers nurture their offspring naturally. Children learn proper morals and social conduct based upon a female-inspired education. Without this domestic influence on their lives, children fall into the trap of an “eye for an eye” ideology. The monster that Mary Shelley conceives in *Frankenstein* defies the domestic conception of a maternally guided household. The piece serves as a didactic tool; Shelley, in representing the Romantic Movement, warns nineteenth century society about the dangers of a maternally void world, a world that contradicted the Romantic conception of proper maternal guidance in both the home and in society.

Keywords

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Romantic movement, maternal domesticity

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Keith R. Swaney

Is man inherently good or evil? Nineteenth century Romantics, inspired by the doctrine of Jean Jacques Rousseau, hypothesized that man is a product of his or her environment. Middle class society imputed the mother as the gateway by which a child learns to become a model human being. This theory held that mothers nurture their offspring naturally. Children learn proper morals and social conduct based upon a female-inspired education. Without this domestic influence on their lives, children fall into the trap of an “eye for an eye” ideology. The monster that Mary Shelley conceives in *Frankenstein* defies the domestic conception of a maternally guided household. The piece serves as a didactic tool; Shelley, in representing the Romantic Movement, warns nineteenth century society about the dangers of a maternally void world, a world that contradicted the Romantic conception of proper maternal guidance in both the home and in society.

A Romantic of the nineteenth century believed that a father, a mother, and their children comprised the model family. The home was not merely a place, but rather “a sense of stability” that signified an intact marriage within a nuclear family.¹ Nature prescribed distinct gender roles for both men and women. Males were the breadwinners of the family, while women managed the domestic sphere, overseeing the physical and moral development of the children. Romantics subscribed to this segregation of gender roles because nature intended families to function in this manner. Mothers, in particular,

possessed the innate ability to provide both physical and spiritual nourishment to their offspring. “For motherliness was boundless,” feminist Ellen Key wrote, as “its very nature was to give, to sacrifice, to cherish, to be tender, even as it is the nature of the sun to warm, and of the sea to surge.”² In this domestic sphere, the Romantics feared an imbalance of parental influences, especially the absence of the mother altogether; for, a mother not only brings the child into the world, but develops his or her character as well.

Dr. Frankenstein’s monster, to the abhorrence of the Romantics, lives according to a masculine conception of the world. He represents all that is primitive about man in the raw state of nature.³ Uncontrolled emotions and the absence of a moral code move him to act impulsively without sympathy. Percy Shelley, commenting on the texture of his wife’s masterpiece, wrote:

The direct moral of the book consists; and it is perhaps the most important, and of the most universal application, of any moral that can be enforced by example. Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked.⁴

Ironically, however, the monster is not totally culpable for his behavior. His underdevelopment as an individual stems, in part, from a breach with nature, as the monster is not naturally born, but rather *artificially created*. By manipulating nature, as Ellen Moers argues, “He [Frankenstein] defies mortality not by living forever, but by giving birth.”⁵ In effect, Frankenstein besmirches not only a natural process, but also the

¹ Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife: New England Women and the Whaleshery, 1720-1870* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 238.

² Ellen Key, “The Renaissance of Motherhood,” in Eleanor S. Riemert and John C. Font, eds., *European Women: A Documentary History, 1789-1945* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980), 172.

³ Stemming from the work of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, the state of nature refers to the tendency of man to either good or evil in his natural state.

⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “On Frankenstein,” in J. Paul Hunter, ed., *Frankenstein: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 186.

⁵ Ellen Moers, “Female Gothic: The Monster’s Mother,” in J. Paul Hunter, ed., *Frankenstein: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 220.

creed of the Romantics, which glorified the beauty of the individual in harmony with nature.

After observing what he crafted with his own hands, Frankenstein, instead of praising his creation, labels it a *devil*. The distraught creator relates, “I remained . . . catching and fearing each sound as if it were to announce the approach of the demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life.”⁶ Nineteenth century society perceived the birth of a child as a miracle, since both the biological and emotional connections between the mother and child extended from pregnancy to birth. Conversely, Frankenstein rejects his own hideous creation. Romantics would have affirmed that, even if Victor Frankenstein actively raised and educated his creation, the monster would have lacked the morality inculcated by a feminine touch. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton vouched in *The Woman’s Bible*: “The angel who whispers into our [female] ears is knowledge, foresight, high motive, ideality, unselfish love. A conscious attitude towards the ideal still unattained, a lofty standard of virtue for the coming offspring. . . .”⁷ Stanton’s conviction corresponds to the Romantic thesis of gender roles. In other words, the *mother* is the only figure who is so strongly attached to her child that she, without reservation, sacrifices herself in order to raise her offspring as nature intends.

Is it possible, therefore, for a child to develop morally without the feminine influence? Romantics would concur: no. Since nature created a division of labor, so to speak, encompassed within specific gender roles for men and women, the mother’s role was integral to the well being of the child. “The man’s work is to *kindle* the fire on the hearth, the woman’s is to *maintain* it,” Ellen Key penned; “it is man’s to *defend* the lives

⁶ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 35.

⁷ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible* (Salem, NH: Ayer Company, 1988), 29.

of those belonging to him; woman's to *care* for them. This is the division of labour by which the race has reached its present stage."⁸ According to the Romantic ideology, male labor creates the capacity to live in the physical home, as well as the material goods required to survive. Competition permeates the male world; without a mother's influence, people would live by the Darwinian notion of "survival of the fittest." The mother, on the contrary, is the moral arbiter of the family. She provides stability to the home not economically, but rather *domestically*, as she loves her family unconditionally.

The Romantics, moreover, recognized the purport of companionship, the glue that held the domestic world together. Companionship bound the husband to the wife, as well as the child to his mother. *Frankenstein*, however, provides a variant model, in which the kinship ties associated with maternal domesticity fail. Continuously, the monster experiences rejection, causing a series of reactions that affect not only him, but tragically, others as well.

Since he never had a mother, the monster *searches* for kinship ties, but others repeatedly turn him away. As a result, he seeks the beauty of companionship in a primitive fashion because he does not know how otherwise. He reveals, in a conversation with Frankenstein:

I began to observe, with greater accuracy, the forms that surrounded me, and to perceive the boundaries of the radiant roof of light which canopied me. Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again.⁹

Because the monster lacks the maternal guidance so integral for emotional development, he finds it tough to express himself. He wants to enjoy the beauty of his surroundings,

⁸ Key, 173.

⁹ Shelley, 69.

yet has not been instructed on how to do so. In addition, he is incapable of controlling any emotion that emanates from his soul.

The mother's absence compels the monster to revolt against nature; namely, by manufacturing personal kinship ties. Romantics despised this type of lifestyle because it undermined nature's intentions. For instance, the monster seeks an education based upon uncultured, primitive conceptions of the world. Along with his perusal of literature, the monster observes, at length, the life of a domestic family, including the sincere love that each member holds for one another. At first, the monster indulges in sentimental literature that addresses many of the issues with which he struggles. "Who was I?" the monster wonders, "What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them." The monster ponders a number of identity issues, yet at this juncture, he lacks the context necessary to comprehend them. Rather, he "sympathized with" the characters about which he read.¹⁰ By reading Milton's *Paradise Lost*, however, the monster realizes his abnormality. More importantly, he concludes that he is alone. The distressed monster relates:

But *Paradise Lost* excited different and far deeper emotions. . . . Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence. . . . But I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition.¹¹

According to the Romantics, the mother, by nourishing the domestic environment, instructs her children on appropriate, moral behavior by setting examples. Thus, when the child becomes cognizant of his or her own decision-making powers, he or she is able to and *desires* to think and act independently, based on a code of ethical conduct. During

¹⁰ Quotations drawn from *Ibid.*, 86.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

this same phase of life, however, the monster discerns his true nature: “wretched, helpless, and alone.” Just as the domesticated child learns of his or her own worth from a loving mother in the sheltered, warm environment of the home, Frankenstein’s monster learns as well, but out in the barbarous wilderness.

Paradise Lost incites a deep emotional conflict within the monster, in that he doubts his worth altogether. More importantly, though, the scientific journal written by Frankenstein convinces the monster of his utter nothingness. Literary critic Mary Poovey concludes, “When the creature discovers its true origin—not in the social texts it learns to read—but in its maker’s notebooks it can no longer deny the absolute ‘horror’ of its being. . . .”¹² Just as God rejected the fallen angel of Satan, Frankenstein scorns his own creation, yet even before the monster has the opportunity to develop. Frankenstein’s diary confirms his creation’s worthlessness; the monster has been abandoned and has nothing for which to live, except the possibility of a manufactured, unfulfilling companionship.

“In every strong maternal feeling,” as Key asserted, “there is also a strong sensuous feeling of pleasure—a pleasure which thrills the mother with blissful emotion when she puts the child to her breast.”¹³ Romantics identified the mother as the bastion of sentimentality in the family. The behavior of Frankenstein’s creature, on the contrary, lacks sentimentality because it lives without companionship. Consequently, the monster behaves according to rational instincts. Romantics feared a society, however, in which the use of pure reason sparks decision-making. For, if people behave according to rational thought exclusively, the “eye for an eye” philosophy controls the world.

¹² Mary Poovey, “My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism,” *PMLA* 95 (May 1980): 337.

However, as a result of a tight-knit family experience, cultivated by the mother, Romantics trusted in man's ability to transcend the uncivilized state of nature. The monster, even without a semblance of maternal guidance, realizes that companionship fosters happiness. He orders Dr. Frankenstein to create an "Eve," so to speak, a companion that would alleviate the monster's evil nature: "Remember, that I am thy creature. . . . I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous."¹⁴ In order to facilitate his personal happiness and ethical behavior, the monster understands that he needs a companion. However, his creator proves unwilling to comply; thus, the monster sinks into the abyss of evil.

Shortly thereafter, the monster murders Frankenstein's fiancée, exacting revenge at a terrible cost. Up to this point, the creature constrains his emotional fluctuations. However, when both his creator and other human beings reject him, then why even attempt to live morally? Percy Shelley provides a unique commentary: "The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own."¹⁵ In other words, a romanticized concept of the world entails a recognition that every being possesses worth and beauty. Love inspires people to act morally. If people could not love their neighbors, the world would lack civilized societies. The dissolute individual, whom the monster represents, would steal, kill, and lie to fulfill his or her worldly desires.

According to the tenets of romanticized domesticity, mothers boast the capacity to defeat wanton conduct in the world. Moreover, they have a societal *duty* to raise young men and women to become model, patriotic citizens. The Romantics championed the

¹³ Key, 173.

¹⁴ Shelley, 66.

ideals of the French Revolution, in general, yet they believed that every individual has a value to the state. Thus, with the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars that preceded the invention of *Frankenstein*, mothers became “pillars of the new national state.” Families flourished along with a new patriotic duty to the state.¹⁶ The hideous monster of *Frankenstein* connotes the failures of this domestic lifestyle that the Romantics, including Mary Shelley, held so dear. “Motherliness,” according to Ellen Key, “must be cultivated by the acquisition of the principles of heredity, of race-hygiene, child-hygiene, child-psychology. Motherliness must revolt against giving the race too few, too many, or degenerate children.”¹⁷ A successful mother, according to this school of thought, stabilizes society by providing a moral, *guided* education to her offspring.

Within this hierarchal family structure, furthermore, children have a duty to obey their mothers. In a larger sense, this obedience prepares them for their lives as responsible citizens. Again, *Frankenstein* warns nineteenth century European society about the dangers of a motherless world. In demanding a companion, the monster asserts, “You [Frankenstein] are my creator, but I am your master.”¹⁸ Dr. Frankenstein’s creature utterly destroys the hierarchal model of domestic society. In a society that relied upon deferential models to produce both loyal children and citizens, the monster disintegrates this idealized model, leaving disorder to reign in its place.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* embodies an author’s attempt to come to grips with the revolutionary nature of her time. Science became a dominant force in the world in the early 1800s. Romantics fought against all proposals to manipulate nature, even if

¹⁵ The words of Percy Shelley, as cited in Poovey, 338.

¹⁶ Priscilla Robertson, *On Experience of Women: Pattern and Change in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 12-13.

¹⁷ Key, 175.

they resulted in progress. In addition, the question of gender roles arose. Economically, a man provided substance for his family, while the woman nurtured the household by offering moral direction. In a society that depended on these proscriptions, *Frankenstein* represents a chaotic world in revolt.

Moreover, the novel alerted nineteenth century society to the necessity of preserving domesticity in the home, so that the outside world would benefit as a result. Mothers, in particular, fostered love and companionship for their children. In return, children utilized this maternally inspired foundation later in life to cultivate an ideal society. Human beings could become “good,” in essence, by revolting against the evil state of nature, a tenet the Romantics emphasized. What Dr. Frankenstein’s monster symbolizes, to the shock of European society, is man in his uncultured, uncivilized, and *sinful* form. Since the monster lacks the maternal figure in his life, the companion who teaches unconditional love, he possesses no capacity to behave lovingly and morally at all. Rather, he rejects both the creator and the society that has rejected him.

¹⁸ Shelley, 116.