

# Domestic Affection and the Voice of Conscience in *Frankenstein*: Mary Shelley's Corrective to William Godwin's Moral Idealism

David S. Hogsette, PhD  
Presentation Manuscript

## **Introduction: Mary Shelley, Radicalism, and a Mind of One's Own**

Throughout her life, Mary Shelley lived under the constant shadow of wondrous inspiration yet heavy expectation of her radical parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. In her young adult life, Mary Shelley felt pressure from Godwin as well as her husband Percy Shelley to live up to her progressive heritage. Yet, she was also a product of her own time, which was more conservative than her parents and husband. According to Lee Sterrenburg, Mary Shelley “rejected her utopian and radical heritage and opted for a more conservative and pessimistic view of the world.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps characterizing Mary Shelley as a pessimistic conservative is an overstatement, but she certainly tempered, and in some instances directly rejected, aspects of Godwin's radical idealism, philosophy of conscience, and theory of moral judgment. Ultimately, Mary Shelley developed her own understanding of conscience, and she formulated her own theory of moral judgment that corrected Godwin's disinterested rationalism with Wollstonecraft's emphasis on domestic sensibility and affection. Mary Shelley was in many ways her own woman, thinker, and writer. In the novel *Frankenstein*, she integrates, challenges, and corrects aspects of Godwin's moral philosophy, demonstrating that the development and function of the conscience ultimately depends upon pursuing and nurturing domestic affection. **[SLIDE]**

## **Moral Judgment and Conscience Formation**

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Sterrenburg, “Mary Shelley's Monster: Politics and Psyche in *Frankenstein*,” in *The Endurance of “Frankenstein”: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 143.

Mary Shelley's novel about scientific hubris and transgressive creation explores the ramifications of a tortured conscience, relying heavily upon contemporary moral philosophy concerning the relationship between education and moral judgment. She received an erudite education by reading extensively from her father's library, as well as interacting with such thinkers, writers, and scientists as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Humphry Davy, and Charles Lamb, each who frequented the Godwin home.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in the two years prior to composing *Frankenstein*, she read and discussed with Percy Shelley the writings of John Locke, David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and William Godwin.<sup>3</sup> Studying the central tenets of these Enlightenment thinkers directly informed her understanding of moral judgement, and she incorporated competing views of the conscience into the ethos of her novel, ultimately embracing Kant's moral judge perspective while questioning Godwin's dismissiveness of guilt and remorse.<sup>4</sup>

Within the context of these formative Enlightenment thinkers, Mary Shelley established her own concept of conscience and moral development. She understood Kant's argument that categorical imperatives are necessarily *a priori* principles inherent in the human individual.<sup>5</sup> Even though Mary Shelley did not fully embrace this Kantian view, she did have an affinity for David Hume's insistence on innate human affection that functions in moral judgment.<sup>6</sup> For Mary Shelley,

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<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Butler, ed., introduction to *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, by Mary Shelley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), x; Dorothy Hoobler and Thomas Hoobler., *The Monsters: Mary Shelley and the Curse of Frankenstein* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), 45-47.

<sup>3</sup> See Stuart Curran, ed., "Mary Shelley's Reading: Publication Date List," *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, A Romantic Circles Electronic Edition, 2009, <https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/frankenstein/MShelley/bypub> (accessed November 25, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> The development of natural law and natural rights in Western thought is an important corollary to Enlightenment views on the conscience and moral judgment. For a brief history of natural law theory leading up to the Romantic era, see R. S. White, *Natural Rights and the Birth of Romanticism in the 1790s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 10-40.

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Lara Denis, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, in *Past Masters*, ed. Mark C. Rooks, vol. 42 of *British Philosophy: 1600-1900* (Charlottesville: InteLex, 1993), 172. <http://pm.nlx.com/xtf/view?docId=britphil/britphil.42.xml>.

education was fundamental to engaging this innate domestic affection, developing the proper understanding of moral law, and honing the conscience. Thus in *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley includes literacy narratives to illustrate the ways in which the various characters develop moral understanding leading to virtuous action, or the lack thereof. In her novel, Mary Shelley illustrates that without direct guidance unto moral truth, an individual can misuse the faculty of reason, develop extremely flawed moral knowledge, and thus live a life of vice, while thinking it virtuous.

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### **Education, Literacy Narratives, and Conscience (Mal)Formation**

Mary Shelley develops her principle of moral education directly from Rousseau and Godwin. According to Rousseau, the human subject is educated through three key means: nature, human interaction, and experience.<sup>7</sup> Godwin draws from these Rousseauian educational categories when describing moral development through literature, education, and political justice.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, we see these categories in Mary Shelley's literacy narratives for the three main characters in *Frankenstein*. The Creature develops mainly from experiences in nature, with some education through human interaction (namely, vicariously reading literature with the De Lacey family), whereas Walton and Victor learn primarily through human interaction (reading literature and attending school and university), with some education from nature and experience.

Godwin and Mary Shelley both expressed concern over the problems of unguided reading and unstructured formal education. Reading and formal education in themselves are not sufficient means for effective moral instruction. Rather, such education must be intentionally structured and focused on virtue. Mary Shelley illustrates this concern in her novel by presenting literacy narratives of the three main characters in which unguided reading results in the formation of

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<sup>7</sup> Rousseau, *Emile*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Godwin, *Political Justice*, 20.

flawed ideas and problematic moral sensibilities. Whereas Godwin suggests the government or political justice should be the ultimate educational corrective, Mary Shelley posits domestic relationship and the family as the answer to improper education. Yet, given the flawed nature of humanity, even this domestic ideal, according to Mary Shelley, does not always overcome errors in moral education and conscience formation.

Mary Shelley illustrates that without proper interpretive guidance and principled study, the individual can follow a path to moral error, personal danger, and social disruption. Walton's self-study fuels a zeal for adventure and a lust for scientific discovery that nearly kills him and his crew. Victor's unprincipled examination of alchemy, synthesized with a systematic study of natural philosophy, inspires his transgressive creation that brought death and mayhem to his family. Lastly, the Creature's undirected affective interpretation of *Paradise Lost* and other texts results in terrific horror, the murder of innocent human beings, and untold psychological trauma for the loved ones of those victims. Mary Shelley reveals that right reading is fundamentally important to the proper development of the human mind and soul. Unguided affective reading encourages a subjective misreading of texts that, consequently, can result in disastrous misapplications of the ideas formed in the reader's mind. [SLIDE]

### **Victor as a Problematic Godwinian Moral Agent**

Mary Shelley challenges Godwin's political and moral idealism by representing Victor Frankenstein as a deeply flawed moral agent. Because he embraces key Godwinian principles, Victor eventually develops into an unsympathetic, self-centered idealist who risks his own life, as well as the lives of his family and friends, all for the pursuit of forbidden scientific knowledge, personal glory, and public acclaim. The disastrous consequences of Victor's attempts to ignore his

guilty feelings and repressed regret over his immoral behavior represent a significant critique of Godwin's philosophical necessity, which led him logically to reject guilt and remorse.

By neglecting his relationships and commitments to family and friends, Victor enters a frightening world of solipsistic scientific enthusiasm. And due to his weakened domestic affection, moral desensitization, and emaciated sensibilities, he successfully suppresses his conscience and engages his horrific materialistic pursuit of life by immersing himself in death:

I kept my workshop of filthy creation: my eyeballs were starting from their sockets in attending to the details of my employment. The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials; and often did my human nature turn in loathing from my occupation, whilst, still urged on by an eagerness which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion.<sup>9</sup>

Victor pursues transgressive posthuman scientific creation—he creates a hybrid lifeform by synthesizing human parts obtained from the dissecting rooms of hospitals and medical schools with animal parts taken from slaughterhouses. He knows deep inside that this mode of trans-species creation is morally wrong, because his conscience turns in loathing from the horrific consequences of his work, and his eyes bulge in revulsion at the implications of his scientific transgressions. Yet, he suppresses the righteous moral judgements of his conscience, ignoring his inner Kantian judge<sup>10</sup> and dismissing its moral warnings. The more he suppresses his conscience, the greater is his eagerness to transgress moral boundaries and scientific limitations, such that he mutates into a monstrous figure of blunted conscience.

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<sup>9</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> For Kant's depiction of the conscience as internal judge and alien moral other, see his *Metaphysics of Morals*, 203-205. See also Jeanette Kennett, "The Cost of Conscience: Kant on Conscience and Conscientious Objection," *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 26, no. 1 (2017): 69-81; Jeffrey Morgan, "Self-Knowledge and the Approximation of Divine Judgment: Conscience in the Practical Philosophy and Moral Philosophy of Immanuel Kant," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 36, no. 1 (2016): 107-22; and Dean Moyar, "Unstable Autonomy: Conscience and Judgment in Kant's Moral Philosophy," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 5 (2008): 327-60.

Mary Shelley's most dramatic critique of Godwin's moral philosophy comes through the episode in which the innocent Justine is falsely accused of murdering William Frankenstein, Victor's younger brother. During the trial when it becomes apparent that Justine will be unjustly sentenced to death, Victor bemoans, "I could not sustain the horror of my situation, and when I perceived that the popular voice and the countenances of the judges had already condemned my unhappy victim, I rushed out of the court in agony. The tortures of the accused did not equal mine; she was sustained by innocence, but the fangs of remorse tore my bosom and would not forego their hold."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Victor's conscience is the accusing judge, but instead of acting upon right moral judgment, he selfishly portrays himself as a victim of a torturous conscience.<sup>12</sup> He even claims that his remorse is so severe that his mental and emotion anguish at the hands of his conscience are worse than the unjust tortures and punishment delivered to the innocent Justine. He is consumed by the horror of his own guilt, yet he refuses to take personal responsibility, nor does he try to rectify the injustice. He would rather let Justine die than reveal the Faustian truth of his transgressions. Victor's lack of domestic affection and basic human decency transforms him into a self-pitying coward and an unsympathetic representative of Godwinian morality. [SLIDE]

### **The Creature and Domestic Affection as Correctives to Godwinian Morality**

Mary Shelley not only provides a satirical critique of Godwin's moral theory in the character of Victor, but she also provides a nuanced corrective through the self-aware and morally actualized product of Victor's transgressive science—the Creature. During the melodramatic scene of Victor's first confrontation with the Creature two years after his animation in the Ingolstadt laboratory, the Creature makes an impassioned and judicious plea that Victor take moral

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<sup>11</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 82.

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of Victor's remorse as the tortures of a reprobate's conscience, see Jane Goodall, "Frankenstein and the Reprobate's Conscience," *Studies in the Novel* 31, no. 1 (1999): 19-43.

responsibility for his actions and care for his creation as is only just for a creator to do. The Creature rightly asks that he be made happy by being granted that which is natural and afforded all other human creatures—domesticity:

Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.<sup>13</sup>

The Creature presumes a god-human relationship sealed by a divine covenant as revealed in the Bible and *Paradise Lost*. However, it is an infeasible desire, because Victor is not divine and cannot establish nor maintain such a covenant.

The Creature becomes the mouthpiece for Mary Shelley's corrective to Godwinian rational ethics that privileges first-order impartiality and minimizes the emotional dimensions of moral judgment. Whereas the Godwinian Victor eschews community and rejects domestic affection, the Creature seeks relationship and desires domestic bliss. The Creature implores Victor: "I am miserable, and . . . [all humanity] shall share my wretchedness. Yet it is in your power to recompense me, and deliver them from an evil which it only remains for you to make so great, that not only you and your family, but thousands of others, shall be swallowed up in the whirlwinds of its rage."<sup>14</sup> The Creature then recounts his experiences observing the De Lacey family and explains how he learned the intended benevolent purposes of the idealized, natural, nuclear family based upon mutual respect, care, and compassion. Ultimately, the Creature realizes what Victor

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<sup>13</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 96-97.

<sup>14</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 97.

never has been able to grasp: human beings were created to be in community through domestic relationships, and since he was created in the image of humanity, he, too, must be human (or, at least, humanoid) and must also be intended to live in domestic relationship. Since no human will accept him, he needs a mate of the opposite sex, made of the same nature and material as himself in order to be fulfilled through domestic relationship. [SLIDE]

### **Conclusion: Mary Shelley's Moral Framework Reaffirmed**

The keys to Mary Shelley's moral framework and her theory of conscience formation as revealed in *Frankenstein* are love of neighbor, concern for the alien other, desire for fellowship, and longing for domestic communion. Victor, as an exemplar of Godwinian moral philosophy, is the worst violator of these core ethical principles, because he shuns his family and friends, alienates his fiancé, abandons his Creature, and denies the Creature his own mate and chance at domesticity, thus abnegating his parental responsibility to nurture, educate, and raise his fabricated child.

By contrast, the Creature, despite all the injustices perpetrated against him, desires community, fellowship, love, and domesticity. Victor and all of humanity denies him these basic, moral imperatives, yet still he seeks after the foundations of Mary Shelley's ethical ideals. Moreover, Walton, who listens to both Victor and the Creature, becomes the model reader of these confessional narratives, and by agreeing to turn the ship around so that he and his crew may return to their respective families, he foregrounds Mary Shelley's moral ideal: the ultimate ethic is love, and human flourishing is established in domesticity and nourished through community.