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FEMININE ROMANTICISM IN MARY SHELLEY’S *FRANKENSTEIN*

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Abstract

This thesis explores Romanticism presented in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. I incorporate Anne K. Mellor’s work in identifying Romanticism’s two main forms: feminine and masculine Romanticism. The Romantic ideologies as we know them today were established by the “High Romantics.” The leaders in the movement include literary figures such as Lord Byron, Wordsworth, and Keats. They produced work reflecting the values of “masculine” Romanticism, a form that revered unrestrained emotion, the sublime, and the desire for domination. Mary Shelley, along with other female writers, also expressed the ideals of Romanticism, but their writings exhibited an alternate ideological form called “feminine” Romanticism. In her famous novel, Shelley critiques the values of masculine Romanticism and advocates ideals of feminine Romanticism by revealing the superiority of reason over excess passion, subtle beauty of nature over the extreme forces of the sublime, and mutual affections over the desire for power.
One stormy night, in a house nestled in the scenic landscapes of Switzerland, four travelers reflected on the powers of science and of the supernatural. The year was 1816, and Western Europe was saturated with the technological and philosophical products of the Industrial Revolution. The Romantic era was at its peak, and the travelers were certainly affected by the movement. Within a room reverberating from the clashes of thunder and in the spirit of friendly competition, a contest was proposed to write a ghost story. Inspired by the night’s conversation of science’s recent achievement of harnessing the power of electricity, one young woman accepted the writing challenge. The woman was Mary Shelley, and the novel she was about to begin was *Frankenstein*.

While there are many adaptations of Shelley’s novel, the depiction of a maniacal scientist bestowing life on a physically grotesque creature remains a central theme in all versions. In popular culture, Frankenstein is portrayed as a tall, green, and mumbling monster equipped with neck bolts. In the original story, however, Shelley gives the monster’s creator, Victor Frankenstein, the famous name while the monster proves to be an articulate being capable of thought and emotion. Through her characters, Shelley succeeds in exploring multiple controversial topics and challenges the social and political ideologies of her time.

During Shelley’s life, the ideologies associated with the term Romanticism were emerging in both society and literature. Starting in the mid-18th century, a variety of philosophical ideas and values surfaced in the western world. For example, the superiority of nature, emotion, imagination, and individualism were advocated during this period. Years later, scholars retrospectively observed the collection of views of this era and termed it the “Romantic movement.” Scholars tied the Romantic period to the leading, male literary writers, and the content of these figures’ work
defines the conventional understanding of Romantic ideals. Romanticism as it is still often understood today is linked to the “High Romantics” like Byron, Keats, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Percy Shelley. While differing in many ways, these writers celebrate the above values, which Anne K. Mellor refers to collectively as “masculine Romanticism.”

Mellor insists that restricting the term “Romanticism” to just these male writers results in an incomplete understanding of the literature and thinking of this period, because it excludes the many female authors who actively challenged these emergent “masculine” ideals. Specializing in eighteenth and nineteenth century British literature, women's writing, feminist theory, and the visual arts ("English at UCLA: Anne Mellor") Mellor’s work focused on female writers and themes within English Romanticism. Mellor revolutionized a new understanding for academics studying English Romanticism by discerning two main ideologies that emerged during the Romantic period. She termed these two approaches “masculine” and “feminine” Romanticism. She revealed how the High Romantics and other notable male writers typically favored the ideologies of masculine Romanticism while women writers like Mary Shelley, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen wrote novels that upheld the principles of feminine Romanticism. In *Romanticism and Gender*, Mellor writes that “the women writers of the Romantic period for the most part foreswore the concern of their male peers with the capacities of the creative imagination, with the limitations of language, with the possibility of transcendence or “unity of being,” with the development of an autonomous self, with political (as opposed to social) revolution, with the role of the creative writer as political leader or religious savior” (2). Additionally, Mellor discusses how “Romantic women writers challenged the masculine ‘feminization of discourse’ from another direction, by unmasking the
oppression of women encoded within the eighteenth-century bourgeois construction of femininity” (10). Because of Mellor’s work, we now have greater insight to a wider range of ideals that existed but were not necessarily popularized by the traditional academic outlook on the Romantic period.

Many readers deem *Frankenstein* to be Shelley’s critique of science due to her descriptions of the deleterious effects arising from Victor’s scientific pursuits. The imagery of electricity and theme of curiosity leading to the deaths of nearly every character certainly suggest Shelley’s rebuke of science, which aligns with the Romantic’s favoring of nature over the mechanical world shaped by the Industrial Revolution. While Shelley does reproach science in her novel, this single interpretation is superficial. Mellor’s examination of the dominant ideologies of Shelley’s time demonstrate that *Frankenstein* is much more than a novel that warns readers of the unforeseen consequences of technology. Mellor’s insights urge readers to interpret the novel differently. Throughout the novel, Shelley assesses Romantic values influenced by the patriarchy of the time period, highlighting their dangers. She makes the ideologies of masculine Romanticism central in her destructive, male characters’ lives while simultaneously, more subtly, promoting feminine Romanticism. The theme of science becomes a means for Shelley to critique a male-controlled society and by extension, masculine Romanticism. Rather than science simply representing a malignant force, she points to Shelley’s more specific concern, as science becomes a means through which men seek dominance over nature. Shelley perceives that the desire for authority, an attribute associated with the male figure, represents exploitation and destruction of a female-gendered Nature. This idea is elaborated in more detail later in the paper.
Mellor’s work in gender-based ideology during the Romantic period serves as a framework for identifying the ideals of both masculine and feminine Romanticism in literary works. In this paper, I want to apply Mellor’s contribution to identify Mary Shelley’s critique of masculine Romanticism and her promotion of feminine Romanticism’s values in *Frankenstein*. Shelley accomplishes this critique by portraying, in her two main male characters, excess emotion, their attraction to the sublime, and their desire for domination. In contrast, the novel affirms moderate emotion, the calming effects of the beautiful, and nurturing relationships. For Shelley, the values embodied in her male characters lead to devastating outcomes. In particular, they foster an obsession with the ego. This intense focus on the self, according to feminine Romanticism, leads to the destruction of self and others.

**Shelley’s Biographical Context**

Mary Shelley was born Mary Godwin to Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin on August 1797 in London, England. William Godwin was an English journalist and political philosopher best known for his publication of *Political Justice* in 1793 (Philp). Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was a renowned writer herself. Her most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792, served as an important stepping stone in achieving equal rights among the sexes. She was easily one of the most influential advocates of feminism during her time. At the age of 37, Wollstonecraft conceived a child with Godwin. The child would grow to become the famed Mary Shelley. Although the labor prior to her birth was not a difficult one, complications from placental infection caused Wollstonecraft to die eleven days after Mary was born.
The family structure in Shelley’s household was a complex one. Before Mary’s birth, Fanny Godwin, the child of Mary Wollstonecraft and her American lover Gilbert Imlay, assumed the role as the oldest sibling. After Wollstonecraft’s death four years older, William Godwin married the widowed Mary Jane Clairmont, who brought two additional children, Charles and Claire Clairmont. In 1803, William Godwin, Jr. was born to Godwin and Clairmont as the fifth sibling when Mary was six years old.

In many ways, Mary Godwin’s upbringing was untraditional and this unconventionality carried with her into adulthood. Growing up, Mary gained a very respectable education compared to other girls her age. In her home, she was exposed to a great body of literature and diverse groups of intellectuals who frequently visited the Godwin household. Famous figures include Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the author of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and the leading scientists of galvanic electricity, Humphry Davy and William Nicholson.

During Mary’s adolescence, Percy Bysshe Shelley, one of the major Romantic poets and friend of William Godwin, often met with Mary’s father to discuss current politics. Percy Shelley questioned authority and idolized the untamed spirit. His major works include *Queen Mab* and *The Necessity of Atheism* ("Percy Bysshe Shelley"). Although Percy was married, he developed an affection for Mary, and eventually, the couple fell in love. In 1814, at the age of sixteen and against the wishes of her father, Mary Godwin eloped with Percy Shelley, bringing along her step sister Claire with them to the Continent. It was during their visit of mainland Europe where Mary began and completed her *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*, where she described her journey and established her writing abilities.
Upon returning home two months later, unmarried and penniless, Mary became pregnant with Percy’s child and gave birth to a daughter who died two weeks later. A year later, Mary and Percy conceived a son, William, named after Mary’s father. Mary’s decision to elope with Percy damaged her relationship with Godwin. Due to his growing conservatism, William Godwin vehemently disapproved of Percy and Mary’s relationship—the couple was not married and Percy had a wife, Harriet, and a child with his spouse. After Harriet committed suicide in 1816, Mary and Percy wed. After their marriage, Godwin gradually extended his pardon and was willing to communicate again with his daughter and new son-in-law ("Biography of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley").

Mary’s personal life influenced several elements of her novel. For example, for her entire life, Mary knew that she was the cause of her mother’s death however innocent she was, and the theme of losing a mother figure is presented in 

*Frankenstein*. The topics of death and life, entities that are so closely intertwined, are woven throughout the entire story. Over the years, Mary yearned for her mother’s company, and the discovery of electricity’s ability to reanimate the flesh resonated with Mary. Davy and Nicholson, scientists of galvanic electricity who visited the Godwin household during Mary’s youth, were figures who inspired the subject of electricity and its association with resurrection in Shelley’s novel. Their research was fundamental to Mary’s creation of the first science fiction novel in literature.

*Frankenstein* even incorporates aspects of Mary’s romantic life. Elizabeth A. Fay offers her analysis of the relationship between Shelley’s personal life and her novel. When Mary chose to leave with Percy, who shared many of the same extreme principles as her mother, “she was choosing her mother over her father, radicalism over conservatism, but her first novel, *Frankenstein*, reveals how ambivalent she still
was about the choice” (194). In the story, Victor Frankenstein is impulsive, and this emotionally-charged behavior leads to his death. According to Fay, this reflects Mary’s own uncertainty about her actions. She continues to evaluate the preference for impulsivity when she exposes the dangers of excessive emotion.

In the spring of 1816, Mary, Percy Shelley, and Mary’s stepsister Claire Clairmont moved into a house in Switzerland near Lord Byron’s villa. After arriving in Switzerland, Mary witnessed Europe’s unusually stormy weather in the summer of 1816. Although the true reason for this climate change, which lasted from 1816 to 1818 remains unclear, a reasonable hypothesis is that it was a result of an Indonesian volcano’s eruption (Phillips 59). Forced to remain indoors, the travelers entertained themselves by talking about the paranormal. “We will each write a ghost story,” said Lord Byron, and the competition was set. Afterwards, Mary retired for bed and had a nightmare—the catalyst for her legendary novel *Frankenstein*. In the introduction to the 1831 edition, Shelley describes:

I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion. (xv)

The terror from her nightmare provided the impetus for her Gothic novel. The Gothic genre gained popularity during the Romantic period, as both explored the mysterious and irrational aspects of the human experience. The Gothic novel incorporates some form of the supernatural. Fay claims that the Gothic “explores the threshold between the real and the supernatural, between what is knowable and what is known. It does so
by exploiting characters’ and readers’ fears about the unknown and it compels us by promising mystery and intrigue” (108). Robert D. Hume states in his *Gothic Versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel* that in Gothic writing, “The reader is held in suspense with the characters, and increasingly there is an effort to shock, alarm, and otherwise rouse him.” Ultimately, the Gothic novel attempts to evoke a psychological reaction from the reader. Shelley confesses in the 1831 edition her aspirations for the novel after Byron proposed the contest:

I busied myself to think of a story […] One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaking thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. (xxvi)

Gothic writers, like Mary Shelley, incorporated horror into their works by embedding elements of the paranormal within their stories. But the paranormal does not define Shelley’s use of the Gothic novel. Instead, Shelley places greater importance on revealing the irrational capacities of humans, capacities that are out of one’s control. Shelley instills fear into her readers because she exposes humans’ potential for losing the self to extreme emotion, which threatens a psychological separation from reality.

**Historical Context: Romantic Period and its Ideals**

In addition to her personal background, the social pressures experienced by women during Shelley’s time also influenced the positions she critiques in her novel. During the early 19th century, society was unquestionably patriarchal both socially and legally. Women did not have the same educational opportunities, and therefore could not hold the majority of occupations commonly held by men (Marsh). Women
could not keep their own property, vote, and were coerced by legal and social norms to remain subordinate to their husbands, brothers, and even to their adult sons.

Rousseau, a prominent thinker and writer of the Enlightenment, expressed his views on education and human nature in his 1762 treatise *Emile, or On Education*, claiming that a “women’s education must […] be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young” (qtd. in Mellor *Romanticism* 36). In all relationships with men, Mellor explains, women in the late 18th-century and early 19th-century were expected to be submissive and “were taught to be primarily concerned with arousing and sustaining […] male sexual desire in order to capture the husbands upon whom their financial welfare depended” (36). Known as the “weaker” sex, women served as extensions of their husbands’ accomplishments and were expected to remain exclusively in the domestic sphere. Radical views, as expressed by Wollstonecraft, were not socially acceptable—women were pressured to hold conservative principles that reflected the traditional ideas of gender roles.

The gender ideologies during Shelley’s time are not the only factors that affected her writing. Much of Shelley’s philosophical and political outlook found in her novel was also shaped by the Romantic Movement. Starting in the mid-17th century and lasting to the end of the French revolution, long before Mary’s birth, the Enlightenment promoted values grounded in reason and logic. Also known as “The Age of Reason,” the Enlightenment was a period that praised evidence and proof over the traditional and unquestioned faith justified by religious beliefs. Influenced by the Enlightenment’s reverence for scientific advancement, a new era embraced new
technological progress to expand cities and enhance the manufacturing capabilities of factories. Termed the Industrial Revolution, this period utilized the power of machinery to replace hand tools, and as a result, significantly improved transportation and communication. The steam-powered engine, for example, served as one of the central innovations during the Industrial Age which allowed boats and locomotives to self-propel across thousands of miles ("Age of Enlightenment").

In response to the growing momentum of the Age of Industry, an opposing dogma was born. Romanticism, a counter-cultural movement challenging the Enlightenment’s ideals and social norms, gradually spread across the Western world. According to Marilyn Gaull, Romanticism “is a complex set of ideas and expressions, largely philosophical, that reflect a sudden acceleration in the secularizing of man, nature, and society starting in the eighteenth century […]” (x). Traditionally, English Romanticism is understood to have risen during the 1770s and lasted to the mid-1800s. Prominent voices, while differing in many ways, came together as they - “praised imagination over reason, emotions over logic, and intuition over science” ("The Romantic Era"). Structure and authority were questioned, individuality was praised, and these ideals transferred themselves not only into works of literature, but also into other forms of artistic expression including music and paintings. Competing with the formal visual styles of neoclassicism, Romantic art tended to “break the accepted, rational rules of academic art, allowing a greater role for the uncontrolled, the limitless, the irrational (“Romanticism” 291). As these general descriptions indicate, many scholars consider Romanticism to be a defined philosophical movement associated with several key ideals such as emotional expression and the importance of the imagination. These ideals were promoted by literary figures, particularly the High Romantics, whose work creates the conventional impression of
the Romantic movement. These High Romantics focused on particular aspects of the movement such as an admiration for excess emotion, which according to Mellor, is a characteristic of masculine Romanticism. Additionally, masculine Romanticism emphasizes the individual, creative genius. It encourages isolation, for by separating oneself from the industrialized society, one can observe, reflect upon, and more deeply feel the powers of nature. Those upholding the principles of masculine Romanticism often seek out the sublime in their natural environment, which holds the strongest emotional charge; sublime landscapes “inspire awe and reverence and an emotional understanding that transcends rational thought and words or language” ("The Sublime"). The masculine sublime, focused on the harshness of nature, does not give much significance to nature’s beauty or gentleness, examples of feminine qualities. Mellor explains that “to the extent that the masculine Romantic ideology entails a commitment to the creative process, [...] it also entails a gender ideology which subtly denies the value of female difference” (Romanticism 29). Although masculine Romanticism depends on nature, its sees nature as a resource for the reinforcement of the ego. The use of the sublime is just one example of masculine Romanticism’s inclination to suppress the female domain.

Overflowing passion is a key characteristic of Romanticism, but feminine Romanticism places more importance on moderate expressions of emotion. Feminine Romanticism values emotion, but it is skeptical about feelings that may surge out of control. It favors rational thought and condemns behavior that is acted out on emotional impulse. Although nature is considered to be important for the human psyche, female Romantics do not require strong emotional stimulation from the rugged, primitive scenes associated with the sublime for personal reflection. Feminine Romanticism appreciates tamer sights of nature—it favors beauty over the masculine
sublime. It regards nature as an entity that deserves the greatest respect for its ability to calm and nurture the self. In addition, instead of admiring the self’s experience of nature in isolation, the female Romantics emphasize the human need for social relationships, especially within the domestic household. In her novel *Frankenstein*, Shelley critiques this regard for excess emotion, dependence on the sublime, and the desire for domination; in opposition to these, she portrays the values and experiences associated with feminine Romanticism as the necessary antidotes to the destructive effects of masculine Romanticism.

Published in 1798, *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few other Poems* is a compilation of poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This work is often seen as the official beginning of English Romantic literature and demonstrates Romanticism’s captivation for strong emotions. In the preface, Wordsworth states that “poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility […]” (Wordsworth). Wordsworth thus indicates that not only is feeling an important part of poetry, excess passion is a necessity that permits a writer to convey the sentiments so intimately tied to the human experience. *Lyrical Ballads* set the standard for how emotions should be articulated and to what degree. Many poets and novelists, who aligned with masculine Romanticism, incorporated these elements into their work.

Romantic art undoubtedly centers on human emotions. In an antagonistic response to the Enlightenment’s promotion of reason and rational thought, Romantics placed greater significance on individual feeling. The ideal individual would reflect on his internal sentiments and ultimately allow intuition to guide him. Fay states that Romantic passion
“[N]ot only opened up knowledge of nature and of others, but also showed the depth of one’s soul, and gave a better insight into the individual’s personality than could be offered by outward appearances and behavior. The emphasis on emotions thus opened up the inner as well as the outer world in a way that made it important to begin to understand the relationships between self and other, man and nature, imagination and materials.” (5)

Because of their admiration for powerful emotion, the Romantics idolized man’s sudden and spontaneous bouts of inspiration. Outpourings of feeling are recognized as a requirement for the Romantics under our conventional understanding of them, but in *Frankenstein*, Shelley critiques this central aspect of the ideology of masculine Romanticism.

**Immoderate Emotion**

Shelley provides a negative portrait of characters who embody one quality valued in masculine Romanticism—overwhelming passion. In the course of the novel, intense emotions devolve into various destructive behaviors, and the reader realizes that this “virtue” is essentially a weakness. Although Victor and the creature both readily welcome powerful emotion, Victor is the main figure who surrenders to immoderate passions. Throughout the narrative, Victor and the creature seek to gratify their personal desires, but their devotion to excess feeling leads both to their downfalls.

The first prevalent emotion guiding Victor’s actions is exaltation. Shelley depicts Victor Frankenstein as an academic, aware of his exceptional intellect, who indulges in thoughts of glory for contributing his genius to scientific understanding.
He values knowledge and yearns to comprehend the workings of the physical world. Although he finds pleasure in academic pursuits, the underlying forces shaping his motives are primarily his aspirations for discovery. Grief over his mother’s death is an additional, although subconscious, emotion driving him to create life. While he encounters the “variety of feelings which bore [him] onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success,” he thinks that if he “could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, [he] might in process of time […] renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption” (38-39). This buried desire to resurrect his dead mother reveals itself in Victor’s nightmare after he imbues life into the creature: “I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of flannel” (43). Victor achieves his dream to create life, but this dreams turns into a literal nightmare, exposing the depravity of his motivations. His grief, however, is overshadowed by stronger feelings of exaltation as he believes himself not only capable, but also deserving to know the secret of bestowing life. This pride compels him to push the boundaries of natural laws; he feels “delight and rapture” even as his “imagination was too much exalted” (37-38). Throughout the building of his creation, Victor never considers whether his pursuit is unethical. In fact, he thinks himself noble to offer his talents to scientific advancement. Victor’s pride in his abilities is directly coupled with elation, but by embracing his unjustified over-confidence, Victor surrenders his rational control.

Victor’s excessive pride, which grants him ecstatic feelings of bliss, also subjects him to negative emotions. One example is revulsion. After Victor experiences joy constructing the creature, he encounters intense feelings of disgust. Reflecting on his “achievement,” Victor confesses, “I had desired [infusing life] with
an ardor that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the
dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (42). In a split
second, Victor experiences emotional extremes. Although he invested years of
physical and mental energy into his creation, he cannot process the sudden realization
of his deed. The abrupt change in his feelings only strengthens Victor’s dependency
on his emotions, and out of horror, he abandons his creation. Barbara Johnson and
Robert Hume point out that the creature’s outer disfigurement reflects the ethical
ugliness that develops within Victor as he succumbs to excess pride and ambition;
thus, the creature “mirrors in its outward form [Victor’s] own inward deformity,” and
“Frankenstein's monster can thus be seen as a figure for autobiography as such.”
Because of unrestrained passions, Victor never uses reason to assess his duties once
he fulfills his ambition, and the rest of the novel reveals the terrible costs of allowing
his feelings to go beyond his control.

The next major emotion Victor experiences is overwhelming guilt. After
recovering from illness and reading the heartbreaking news of his brother’s death,
Victor sets off to his home, but along the way, he spots the “gigantic stature” of the
creature illuminated by a flash of lightning (59). In this moment, Victor is struck by
the idea that his creation killed his brother William, and this revelation proves to be
ture. Victor claims that “no one can conceive the anguish [he] suffered during the
remainder of the night” because he knows that he is responsible for his William’s
death (60). After seeing the creature, Victor begins an internal struggle with guilt that
lasts for the remainder of the novel. Victor’s guilt intensifies after the death of Justine
Moritz. Victor claims to persuade the judges to reconsider her sentence, but the
“unfeeling reason of these men” compels Victor’s avowal to die “away on [his] lips”
(71). Still guided by his emotions, Victor does not know how to respond to reason
except to denounce it. Speaking with Justine before she faces her punishment, Victor feels “the never-dying worm in [his] bosom, which allowed of no hope or consolation” reminding him of his blame (70). After Justine’s execution, Victor reflects on his actions:

I had begun life with benevolent intentions, and thirsted for the moment when I should put them in practice and make myself useful to my fellow beings. Now all was blasted: instead of that serenity of conscience which allowed me to look back upon the past with self-satisfaction, and from thence to gather a promise of new hopes, I was seized by remorse and sense of guilt, which hurried me away to a hell of intense tortures, such as no language can describe. (75)

Victor, initially consumed with dreams of achievement and adulation, sees his hopes “blasted” and realizes the destructive path he has chosen for himself. Despite opportunities to act according to reason, not emotion, Victor’s obsessive behavior is the result of impulses grounded in passion. His actions after Justine’s sentence only make it more difficult for him to turn back and experience a contented life. Shifting from exaltation to horror to pressing guilt, Victor’s emotions remain immoderate.

Rage becomes the final emotion that consumes Victor, provoked by the loss of his loved ones at the creature’s hands. While pride prompted Victor to make the creature, the need for freedom from the creature’s torment and from piercing remorse demands that he destroys this “wretch.” Anger drives Victor to unmake his creation. Victor admits that “hatred and revenge burst all bounds of
moderation” and he “ardently wished to extinguish that life which [he] had so thoughtlessly bestowed” (77). After promising to make a female companion for his creature, his fury overpowers him when he notices the creature intently gazing on him. Victor “thought with a sensation of madness on [his] promise of creating another like to [the creature], and trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which [he] was engaged” (150). Out of vengeance, the creature kills Elizabeth on her and Victor’s wedding night, leaving Victor also companion-less. Naturally, Victor is heart-broken, and the passion he could have offered to his wife is transformed and distorted into feelings of hatred against the creature in the novel. After Elizabeth’s death, Victor becomes obsessed with destroying his creation for the remainder of his life: “I was possessed by a maddening rage when I thought of him, and desired and ardently prayed that I might have him within my grasp to wreak a great and signal revenge on his cursed head” (182). Again, emotions are central in Victor’s behavior; the novel insists that the extreme passions, endorsed by the High Romantics, are more likely to become destructive of life rather than ennobling.

Victor’s evolution of emotion spirals towards a state of madness. The aversion Victor experiences after witnessing the creature come to life exposes Victor’s propensity for insanity. After he leaves the creature in his laboratory following its creation, Victor’s physical and mental exhaustion collapse on him all at once. When Victor’s friend Henry Clerval surprises him with a visit the following day, he observes “a wildness in [Victor’s] eyes for which he could not account; and [Victor’s] loud, unrestrained, heartless laughter, frightened and astonished him” (46). In this moment, the reader catches a glimpse of Victor’s tendency to lose his membership among the civilized and cross into a barbaric state of madness. Victor’s mental health
deteriorates further as the creature causes more deaths. When Victor sees the corpse of Clerval, he confesses that his “human frame could no longer support the agonies that [he] endured, and [he] was carried out of the room in strong convulsions” (161). For two months, Victor is in a state of delirium. In this condition, he is removed from sanity, the rational world, and himself. At the end of the novel, Victor, exhausted and in a maddened state of fever asks Walton to destroy the creature if Victor dies before completing the deed. Victor advises him, “I dare not ask you to do what I think right, for I may still be misled by passion” (199). Too little and too late, after his initial anger has become an obsessive desire for revenge, Victor finally seems to acknowledges the excessive emotion that drives him to destroy the creature.

Victor is not the only character who experiences excessive emotions. Although Shelley presents the negative consequences of Victor’s loyalty to masculine Romanticism’s praise for overflowing emotion, she similarly utilizes the creature to critique uncontrolled outpourings of feeling. By the end of the novel, the creature, like Victor, is strongly associated with wrath. While he initially seeks affection, he responds with anger and revenge when he fails to find it. His hatred is magnified and focused on Victor, his creator, as the creature is rejected by everyone he encounters. His emotional excess, like Victor’s, leaves destruction in its wake and ultimately leads to his own destruction. First, the creature was abandoned by his creator. He comes to understand that his appearance prevents him from attaining acceptance, and he consequently, turns his anger towards the man who made him. The DeLacey’s rejection also ignites a powerful anger within the creature; he cultivates the “spirit of revenge [that] enkindled in [his] heart” and, mirroring Victor’s tendency, he allows his emotions to guide his behavior to pursue vengeance (124). He recalls: “from that moment I
declared everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against him who
had formed me, and sent me forth to this insupportable misery” (120). His
primary goal is to inflict equal misery upon his creator and also like Victor, this
devolves into a state of obsession. The creature’s original gentle and temperate
nature become dominated by uncontrolled feelings. The creature’s wrath becomes
inflamed when Victor tears apart the female creature. Once the creature witnesses
the destruction of the only thing that could ease his solitude, he looms over Victor
and declares, “I had feelings of affection, and they were requited by detestation
and scorn” and asserts that Victor can “blast [his] other passions, but revenge
remains—revenge, henceforth dearer than light or food!” (152-153) The creature
is honorable to his feelings—the creature manages to harness his wrath and direct
it towards acts of vengeance against Victor. The creature’s emotions remain
excessive until the end of the novel. After seeing the death of his creator, the
creature declares, “I shall die. I shall no longer feel the agonies which now
consume me, or be the prey of feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched” (203). Like
Victor, the creature’s negative emotions have displaced all his earlier positive
emotions and overwhelmed all reason; they cannot be attenuated, resulting in his
death.

Masculine Romanticism’s ideal of excess emotion is related to the ego.
Unrestrained emotions become focused on the individual, augmenting his or her sense
of importance. On the brink of attaining the goal of creating life, Victor embraces the
pleasure of his achievement. He fails to use his reason to consider the moral
implications of his actions; instead enveloped with pride, he continues his work.
Elevated by emotions of self-praise, he disguises his selfish motivation to create life
as a rational and altruistic service for the future of mankind. Victor's inflated feelings
feed his ego, and he temporarily falls into obsession by having “lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit” (39). The more Victor pours himself into the creature’s construction, the more the creature’s horrific fabricated body reflects Victor’s corrupted spirit and narcissistic obsession. He only sees his creature’s countenance as deformed and frightening when he suddenly perceives the immorality of his deed. Even though Victor feels guilt, he remains more concerned with his own well-being and ignores rational judgment. His emotions tied to Justine’s verdict prevent him from confessing his knowledge of the true killer’s identity, an act that would be supported by selfless reason. Instead he retreats into himself for the sake of self-preservation and remains silent. His emotions consistently draw him away from others, away from responsibility, and towards self-absorption. The egotistical obsession, which is meant to strengthen a sense of self-preservation, has in fact rendered him out of touch with reality and vulnerable to illness as he slips into madness. Through Victor’s character the novel demonstrates that intense, unfiltered emotions focused on the self do not support the individual—they prove deleterious for both psychological and physical health. Ironically, this fixation on ego causes Victor to disconnect from any healthy sense of self. Unlike Victor who wishes to satisfy his ego by exhibiting his intellectual superiority, the creature is initially aware of his own shortcomings and seeks to strengthen his self-esteem in spite of his physical imperfections. But rejections from the outside world force the creature to withdraw into himself. Eventually, even the creature’s self-focus parallels Victor’s egotism. Out of revenge for his abandonment, the creature satisfies his own desires by attempting to make Victor as lonely as he feels. Hume asserts that the creature “which craves love, is an ironic reflection of Frankenstein’s personality, for he can neither love nor respond properly to human feeling” (“Gothic Versus Romantic”). In all, concludes
Hume, Victor’s “striving for a more than human greatness destroys the warmth of his humanity, and gradually he becomes totally involved with the monster which objectifies all his own inadequacies. Their final, mad chase to the north reflects literally their abandonment of society and their total absorption with their mutual self” (“Gothic Versus Romantic”). The individualized ego valued by masculine Romanticism causes suffering and death, as demonstrated by the tragic end of Victor and the creature.

Powerful, overflowing emotion, celebrated within masculine Romanticism, envelops the majority of Frankenstein, and Shelley is clear about the destructive forces it possesses. In a more subtle manner, she describes an alternative approach to dealing with human passions according to the ideals of feminine Romanticism. Feminine Romanticism places greater value on the mind, a philosophical ideal from the Enlightenment. According to Mellor, “[w]omen Romantic writers tended to celebrate, not the achievements of the imagination nor the overflow of powerful feelings, but rather the workings of the rational mind” (Romanticism 2). During Victor’s labors building the creature, emotion superseded rational thought that would normally caution an individual to consider the dangers of bestowing life. After animating his creation, emotion persuaded Victor to abandon the creature then to seek revenge by attempting to kill him, and finally to stray into the Arctic where Victor would eventually die. If Victor had been guided by reason, not emotion, he could have prevented the deaths of his loved ones and himself. Feminine Romanticism does not declare that emotions are inherently bad, but when extreme feelings impede one’s ability to exercise reason and control one’s actions, negative consequences are sure to follow.
Masculine Romanticism idolizes individuality, heightened by immoderate feelings, but Shelley critiques this overstated importance of the individual by demonstrating the human need to maintain mental tranquility and to foster one’s affections—goals that can be achieved within the domestic sphere. In a letter informing Victor of William’s death, his father urges Victor to come back home “not brooding thoughts of vengeance against the assassin, but with feelings of peace and gentleness” (56). Although Victor’s father sends him advice, his counsel foreshadows what Victor will inevitably do. Instead of pursuing feelings of “gentleness,” emotions commonly associated with the feminine, Victor will embrace aggression, a feeling linked to masculinity. Following Justine’s execution, Victor’s father attempts to provide his son some comfort after perceiving his despair. Similar to his caution presented in his letter, Victor’s father offers advice that aligns itself with the ideals of feminine Romanticism, encouraging him to avoid unbridled passion: “excessive sorrow prevents improvement or enjoyment, or even the discharge of daily usefulness, without which no man is fit for society” (76). Victor again fails to heed his father’s wisdom. The excessive sorrow does not fade. Over time, Victor removes himself from his society, his familial relationships, to pursue the object of his afflictions. Victor certainly does not become “fit for society” as he spirals into uncontrollable madness, seeking to satiate his narcissistic obsession.

In addition to the advice provided by Victor’s father, Shelley uses Elizabeth to articulate the ideals of feminine Romanticism. After Victor’s father cannot weaken Victor’s hold on attaining vengeance, Elizabeth offers her words:

Dear Victor, banish these dark passions. Remember the friends around you, who center all their hopes in you. Have we lost the power of rendering you happy? Ah! While we love—while we are
true to each other, here in this land of peace and beauty, your
native country, we may reap every tranquil blessing—what can
disturb our peace?”(78)

Elizabeth, in urging familial affection as the basis of happiness and peace, best
exemplifies the domestic alternative to masculine Romanticism’s reverence for
overpowering emotion. Already committed to act according to emotional impulse,
Victor ignores her pleas. As more of his loved ones die at the hands of his creation,
Victor unquestionably falls deeper into emotional upheaval.

The domestic sphere also affects the creature. As the creature observes the
DeLacey family, he feels some contentment despite his loneliness. During his time in
the hovel, his emotions are stabilized by quietly absorbing the calm energies provided
by the domestic life; during this period of his development, the creature reflects the
ideals of feminine Romanticism to a greater degree than masculine Romanticism. The
creature grows attached to the family, and when “they were unhappy, [he] felt
depressed; when they rejoiced, [he] sympathized in their joys” (97). Even though the
creature has been deprived of any sort of human contact, he manifests a sense of
compassion, an emotion associated with the feminine domain. He possesses strong
feelings, but they are tempered, and the creature finds a certain satisfaction in his
situation. It is not until the creature leaves domesticity and returns to the wilderness,
after he is denied his craving for familial affection, that he loses control of his
emotions. Out of the hovel, the creature’s feelings become overwhelming, and they
encourage him to harm Victor by killing innocent members of Victor’s family.
Domesticity, according to Shelly’s suggestions, has the power to provide peace of
mind. It serves as a grounding even for those who struggle to control overflowing
emotions.
Reason and domesticity both place positive constraints on the ego. Mellor insists that feminine Romanticism views that “a self that is fluid, absorptive, responsible, with permeable ego boundaries” is healthier, and essentially better than a self that is only concerned with the individual (Romanticism 209). Instead of understanding the self as a separate entity, as advocated by masculine Romanticism, feminine Romanticism typically believes that the self “located its identity within a larger human nexus, a family or social community” (209). Shelley makes this point in her novel by showing us what happens when the self rejects this relational identity and, instead, becomes, consumed by emotions which falsely inflate one’s sense of self. Frankenstein’s interest in science turns to an uncontrollable obsession to create life, but ironically, Victor loses his own life in exchange. Mellor reveals that “Frankenstein’s passion for his scientific research is a displacement of normal emotions and healthy human relationships” (Mary Shelley 107). The desire to maintain the ego forces Victor to detach not only from familial relationships but also from any sort of moral foundation. Masculine Romanticism admires the independent creative genius, but Shelley recognizes that detaching oneself from the community will result in the loss of a healthy self identity. The excessive emotion driving Victor to create life isolates him from friends, family, reason, and eventually, himself. Because Victor and the creature commit themselves to their egos, feminine Romanticism’s values of healthy familial and romantic relationships are defeated.

**Sublime**

Another topic associated with Romanticism is the sublime, most often referring to wild and rugged landscapes that evoked raw, wordless emotions from observers. The sublime opposes the Enlightenment’s rational thinking, and can be defined as “a meeting of the subjective-internal (emotional) and the objective-external
(natural world)” where an individual allows “emotions to overwhelm” reason while experiencing “the wonder of creation” (“The Sublime”). In the sublime experience, a person experiences a highly charged emotional relationship with nature.

As cities became more urbanized, Romantics worried that humans were removing themselves from nature and enslaving themselves as extensions of machinery. In this new Age of Industry, the leisure and freedom often enjoyed in the country were forgotten and replaced with schedules and discipline. Romantics glorified the spontaneous childhood visions that served as the source of adult inspiration, but the innocence and purity defining these visions were threatened as cities and factories displaced the landscape. In response, the Romantics looked to nature to rediscover the human spirit and male Romantics found resonance with the sublime experience. According to many Romantics, the sublime reveals the grandeur and divinity of nature and allows one to experience a state of being that transcends the mundane and mechanical world (Philosophical Mindz).

For the Romantics, nature was more than an environment beyond the edges of cities. Nature allowed people to reach a spiritual wholeness. During Shelley’s time, the values attributed to nature merges with secularization, which became increasingly popular and in some ways, replaced the traditional beliefs of Christianity. Christian ideas and undertones, however, remained in Romantic literary work. For example, Fay explains how inspiration came from “some divine, cosmic, or natural force,” comparable to Christianity’s understanding of the Holy Spirit, and “for the Romantics, it allowed the artist to declare that his art originated in a superior inspirational gift and, through his genius, can reach out to touch men across all the physical and social gulfs that stand between them” (11). For some male Romantics, the sublime became a substitute for God, and for Romantic poets, the “poetic
transcendence offered an important alternative to the distrusted mysticism of Christianity. The belief in the imagination required a very real belief in inspiration or the spontaneous quality of artistic production” (10). The sublime experience admired by the High Romantics often served as the inspiration for many of their poetic works.

Published in 1757, the treatise titled *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* by Edmund Burke provides a deeper look into the concept of the sublime. Burke writes: “A mode of terror or pain is always the cause of the sublime” (Burke). The sublime experience is dependent on a certain discomfort or uneasiness from the external elements. But the characteristic of the sublime is not limited to a philosophical ideal enacted by the everyday Romantic. In many Romantic paintings, for example, light and dark are often contrasted with each other to produce a tension that stirs emotions of anxiety and suspense in the viewer. A few famous examples include Claude-Joseph Vernet’s *A Shipwreck in Stormy Seas* completed in 1773 and Joseph Mallord William Turner’s *Snow Storm Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* painted in 1812. Both pieces convey the power and immensity of nature—the small figures accentuate the landscapes’ grand and threatening appearances.

According to Burke, “from the contemplation of a sublime landscape, one is led to a sensible impression of the Deity by whose power such magnificent scenes are created” (*Romanticism* 86). While the experience of the sublime served to heighten one’s spiritual existence, Burke theorized that the “sublime was more psychological than theological; God was merely an idea that displayed the sublime characteristics of obscurity, power, duration, vastness, infinity, difficulty, and magnificence” (Gaull 232). The masculine sublime is somewhat paradoxical in that by losing oneself in the
immensity of nature, one may connect with the sublime “force” to achieve a heightened state of consciousness.

In his treatise, Burke contrasts the concept of the sublime (also called the great) with the concept of the beautiful:

For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth and polished; the great, rugged and negligent: beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line; and when it deviates, it often makes a strong deviation: beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy: beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. (Burke)

Masculine Romanticism is drawn to the extreme and the most “moving in nature: the volcanoes, the earthquakes, the storms, the mountains, caves, and oceans, reminders of God’s power and wrath” including “mysterious phenomena of all sorts that are irrational, inexplicable, powerful, vast, and mostly destructive” (Gaull 232).

Masculine Romanticism is tied to the sublime because of the grandiose and extreme components it possesses—features commonly associated with the cultural interpretation of the male figure. Feminine Romanticism, conversely, does not place great value on the sublime experience. It favors the nurturing and serene characteristics of nature’s beauty, for it arouses “love instead of fear” and displays “order, proportion, [and] clarity” (Gaull 232).
Before writing *Frankenstein*, Shelley expressed her understanding of the sublime experiences in her letters of *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*. During her travels with Percy and her stepsister Claire, she writes:

> The thunder storms that visit us are grander and more terrific than I have ever seen before. We watch them as they approach from the opposite side of the lake, observing the lightning play among the clouds in various parts of the heavens, and dart in jagged figures upon the piny heights of Jura, dark with the shadow of the overhanging cloud, while perhaps the sun is shining cheerily upon us. (Shelley *History*)

Later in her letters, she states: “Nature was the poet, whose harmony held our spirits more breathless than that of the divinest.” Not only does Mary Shelley recognize the sublime scene depicted with the ferocity of storm clouds and lightning, but she also is aware of the spiritual relationship between her psyche and the natural world. Once she begins her famous novel, Shelley certainly includes the subject of the sublime, but through the characters’ development, she proposes that the calmer, tamer aspects of nature—characteristics of beauty embraced within feminine Romanticism—are better for the spirit than the masculine sublime experience, for the sublime is, in the novel, associated with destruction, immorality, and misery in the long term.

The potentially destructive effects of the sublime are demonstrated early on in Victor’s experiences. In one sublime moment, Victor receives his first flashes of inspiration:

> [T]he thunder burst at once with frightful loudness from various quarters of the heavens. I remained, while the storm lasted,
watching its progress with curiosity and delight. As I stood at the door, on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump. (26)

In the coupling of both fear and awe, Victor witnesses the sublime power of nature. Although the storm is “frightful,” he watches it intently and with “delight.” Additionally, Shelley provides symbolic imagery during Victor’s engaged observation. The lightning bolt, untamed and intense, strikes the “beautiful oak” leaving nothing but a “blasted stump.” Lightning, a natural feature related to the sublime and fascinating to the High Romantics, destroys the beautiful tree. The oak tree, characterized by feminine Romanticism’s appreciation for natural beauty, is overpowered and perishes under the power of the lightning. Allegorically, Shelley demonstrates how the masculine force subdues the feminine elements. This sublime experience foreshadows the domination and death of female figures later in the novel.

Moreover, Victor, in isolation, escapes into sublime nature to forget about his personal obligations. Following Justine’s execution, Victor leaves his home to pursue and destroy his creation. On his journey, he is moved by the magnificent scenery:

[The view] had then filled me with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul, and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy. The sight of the awful and majestic in nature had indeed always the effect of solemnizing my mind, and causing me to forget the passing cares of life. I determined to go without a
Shelley reveals that the sublime provides a temporary distraction for the mind. For the High Romantics, untamed and unpredictable nature was a useful tool to transcend to a level above mere personal responsibilities—to forget the “passing cares of life.” Victor desires an emotional escape from his guilt and from the duties required of an ethical creator. Furthermore, in order for Romantics to fully engage with the sublime experience, the individual is most often depicted alone, away from and above all human interaction. Victor even admits that the “presence of another” would ruin the “grandeur of the scene.” He removes himself from the community to attain the most intense effects provided by an encounter with the sublime.

Victor attempts to attain a form of spiritual connection with the masculine sublime, but his endeavors end in overwhelming misery. Returning home after hearing about his brother’s death, Victor experiences the sublime and feels terror as he identifies the creature in the distance:

While I watched the tempest, so beautiful yet terrific, I wandered on with a hasty step. This noble war in the sky elevated my spirits; I clasped my hands, and exclaimed aloud, “William, dear angel this is thy funeral, this thy dirge!” As I said these words, I perceived in the gloom a figure which stole from behind a clump of trees near me; I stood fixed, gazing intently: I could not be mistaken. A flash of lightning illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more
hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy daemon, to whom I had given life. (59)

In this vivid passage, Shelley constructs through her language the antagonistic forces creating the tension associated with the sublime. The tempest, bringing forth dark clouds, is the backdrop against the creature who is lit by the lightning. Shelley thus directs attention to the entity causing the turmoil in Victor’s life. Additionally, the concepts of good and evil are presented. William, the “dear angel” is contrasted with his killer, the creature who assumes the identity of the “filthy daemon.” Victor is immediately reminded of his loss and consecrates the scene and thunderous hymn to William and then spots the grotesque form of the creature. Referring to Christian allegories, Shelley provides a sense of spirituality associated with Victor’s experience—her use of opposing elements contributes to her depiction of the sublime. But during this encounter, the wounds of suffering are reopened rather than any transcendent spirituality being achieved. Shelley persistently connects Victor’s experiences with the masculine sublime with misery.

As with excess emotion, the sublime also encourages the individual to focus on the self because, ironically, by “losing” oneself in the intense emotions of the sublime experience, one inflates the self as it becomes by virtue of this encounter “spiritually charged” from a powerful supernatural entity. As Mellor explains for the High Romantics, the “sublime entails isolation, a struggle for domination, exaltation, and the absorption of the other into the transcendent self” (Romanticism 101). Mellor along with Fay also highlight the gendered aspect of masculine Romanticism’s concept of the sublime. Fay explains that poets under the influence of masculine Romanticism “took on the question of the natural as a
female presence, and used at least some of their poetry to work through the inspirational relation between Nature as the female muse and themselves as the male poet, as well as to use Nature as an access to the masculine sublime” (13). In other words, despite an apparent reverence for the “otherness” of Nature and its awe-inspiring powers, male poets assigned Nature to the role of “muse” to their spiritual and artistic experiences. Thus, masculine Romanticism essentially subordinated Mother Nature in order to elevate their own egos. Every time Victor or the creature encounter the sublime, the beauty of nature and its capacity for pacification is once again obstructed by the ego.

While the masculine sublime encourages the individual to pursue emotional transcendence, which encourages an unhealthy fixation on the self in isolation, feminine Romanticism affirms a symbiotic and harmonious relationship between humans and nature,--as Mellor describes it, “a flowing out, an ecstatic experience of co-participation” with nature (Romanticism 97). For feminine Romanticism, Mellor continues, natural “landscapes are home scenery, the location of blissful childhood memories. Confronting magnificent mountains and lakes, their characters experience a heightened sensibility, not of anxiety, but of love, reverence, and mutual relationship” (Romanticism 97). Nature, according to feminine Romanticism, should be admired for its calm beauty. Unlike the wild, unpredictable, and usually dangerous aspects of nature related to the masculine sublime, its beauty is better for the human spirit. The serenity offered by nature nurtures the individual and seeks to instill a peace that is not found in the sublime. In addition, the admiration of nature for women Romantic writers was rarely solitary; feminine Romanticism encourages the individual to appreciate nature’s beauty and share its calming attributes with company. Shelley demonstrates the
effects supplied by nature’s beauty in *Frankenstein* by revealing its benefits, even though the characters rarely experience them.

Victor regrets not observing nature’s beauty as he builds the creature but receives healing from nature after he bestows life. Looking back at his frenzy during the creature’s construction, Victor confesses, “It was a most beautiful season; never did the fields bestow a more plentiful harvest, or the vines yield a more luxuriant vintage: but my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature. And the same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget those friends who were so many miles absent, and whom I had not seen for so long a time” (40). Victor’s emotional commitment to his labors isolates him from his loved ones and from enjoying the beauties of the natural world. Once he attains his goal, however, he succumbs to illness. Upon Clerval’s visit, Victor begins to regain health in the company of his friend and from the healing effects of nature.

I perceived that the fallen leaves had disappeared, and that the young buds were shooting forth from the trees that shaded my window. It was a divine spring; and the season contributed greatly to my convalescence. I felt also sentiments of joy and affection revive in my bosom; my gloom disappeared, and in a short time I became as cheerful as before I was attacked by the fatal passion. (47)

Taking a break from his obsessive inclinations, Victor is able to notice the world beyond his laboratory. He acquires a more accurate outlook on his life and even admits that his emotions led him down a destructive path. Victor admires the new beginnings represented by the flourishing plants of spring. The growth of florae,
although humble compared to a strike of lightning, exhibits the fertility associated with the “beautiful” aspects of nature. The promise of a new start restores Victor from the distress caused by his deviant endeavor.

Shelley aligns with the ideas of feminine Romanticism as her novel argues that the serene beauty of nature has a greater capacity to offer spiritual wholeness than the sublime experience. Shelley demonstrates this belief through Victor Frankenstein after his recovery. He recalls, “when happy, inanimate nature had the power of bestowing on me the most delightful sensations. A serene sky and verdant fields filled me with ecstasy” (54). Following the terrible news of his brother’s death, Victor seeks comfort from nature again: “I contemplated the lake: the waters were placid; all around was calm; and the snowy mountains, ‘the palaces of nature,’ were not changed. By degrees the calm and heavenly scene restored me” (58). To find consolation, Victor does not pursue the wild and fear-inducing aspects of nature. Alternatively, Victor absorbs the serenity of the natural world. In doing so, he gains emotional equanimity from these “palaces of nature”. Feminine Romanticism proposes that the sublime experience does not permit a true understanding of oneself—it removes one further from spiritual unity. Instead of focusing on the unpredictability and extreme power of nature, feminine Romanticism asserts that comfort and harmony are a reflection of the true, organic divinity of nature. Beauty provides a stability that the sublime, by its very nature, denies, and gradually, internal peace can be attained.

The creature also encounters nature’s mollifying power. Shortly after entreating Mr. DeLacey to persuade the family to accept him, the creature encounters fear and rejection from the very people towards whom he has grown sentimental. Running into the woods “like a wild beast,” he exclaims, “I, like the arch-fiend, bore a
hell within me; and, finding myself unsympathized with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat down and enjoyed the ruin” (120). Shelley places meaning behind the creature’s reaction in the forest. The creature, who serves as a vessel of animalistic emotion, mutilates nature. The following morning, however, the loveliness of nature embraces the creature once again, and he experiences the “emotions of gentleness” in the “sunshine” and enjoys the “balminess of the air” (124). Shelley presents feminine nature to be vulnerable to irrational attacks, but in its underrated subtlety, it continues to exert nurturing and reassuring power. Despite Victor’s search for the unpredictable or the creature’s ability to physically subdue the natural environment, Mother Nature proves to be an enduring force, and given the chance, heals those who open up to receive her nurture.

Victor and the creature guard themselves from the benign effects of nature, and the novel’s settings evolve into evermore desolate and barren landscapes—landscapes that reflect Victor and the creature’s gradual separation from the restorative beauty of nature as well as from their moral and rational capacities.

The masculine sublime encourages immorality while nature’s beauty offers comfort. Overall, the sublime and beautiful serve different functions, but both provide varieties of forgetfulness. Before he is rejected by the DeLaceys, the creature appreciates the time in the hovel and fantasizes the day he would “win their favor, and afterwards their love” by presenting the family his “gentle demeanor and conciliating words” (99). He recalls: “My spirits were elevated by the enchanting appearance of nature; the past was blotted from my memory, the present was tranquil, and the future gilded by bright rays of hope and anticipations of joy” (100). Unlike Victor who finds “ecstasy” by embracing the sublime, the calming features of nature instill peace of mind for the creature. Also unlike his creator who longs to forget his cares, the
creature does not seek to gain amnesic consolation. While Victor overreaches his duty as a human being, the creature yearns for spiritual restoration to be accepted as a human. His abrupt and traumatic origins are not due to any culpability of his own—he only seeks to start anew by letting go of the past. He expresses this desire by immersing himself in the “rays of hope” provided by nature. Victor, on the other hand, is aware of his immoral actions, and resorts to find the turbulence in nature mirrored in his own soul and longs to expunge his sin. Though Victor and the creature attempt to achieve forgetfulness, relief and a new beginning, they differ in their outlooks on nature.

Shelley’s novel explores another facet associated with the sublime. In addition to its powerful and destructive qualities, the sublime concerns itself with space. The masculine sublime is revealed in the vast, expansive landscapes as well as confined spaces which reflect the sense of isolation. Both spaces are presented in their extreme forms in the novel: the immensity of the wilderness, the Alps, and the Arctic, and the limitedness of the laboratory, prison, and the hovel. The settings which are characterized by either vastness or confined spaces usually involve defining moments in the plot which lead to tragic outcomes for the characters. For example, when Victor spots his creation in the Alps following William’s murder, the creature runs into the wilderness where he vows his eternal hatred for mankind; the Arctic, where ice possesses the “roarings of thunder,” is the final location where Victor dies from exhaustion and the creature promises his suicide (98). Most enclosed spaces are also sites of unfavorable events; in both the laboratory and the prison, Victor is isolated and appears blind to the reality of his condition and madness envelopes him. As Nora Sellei points out, only in the hovel, the small space attached to the DeLacey house, does the creature create “a habitable space for himself” and find temporary ease (85).
This small enclosure stands out among other sites, for it is directly related to domestic space. In the hovel, the creature admires and longs for family life, or at least, the acceptance that come from familial relationships. Despite his physical restrictions in his space, the creature is captivated by the DeLacey household and affection for them grows. This hovel, which contrasts with the imposing landscapes of the masculine sublime, reflects the strong family ties advocated by feminine Romanticism.

**Domination**

Throughout the novel, Shelley features the theme of the relationship between humans and nature. Directly related to the Romantics’ passion for nature, the desire for domination — especially the aspiration to control nature through science — is another major aspect of masculine Romanticism critiqued in *Frankenstein*. Romantic works, written in an age where scientific advancement was gaining an almost unstoppable momentum, inevitably addressed the technological and ideological developments that many hailed as bringing progress. Because Shelley’s novel incorporates electricity’s ability to “reanimate” the limbs of corpses, a fairly recent discovery of her time, many scholars consider *Frankenstein* to be the first science fiction novel in literature. Science is undoubtedly a prominent theme in Shelley’s novel — as an undertaking aimed at both understanding and harnessing the elements of nature. While both masculine and feminine Romanticism demonstrate an aversion for an artificial world deprived of any “natural” inspiration, the High Romantics were more concerned with the influence of technology on the individual. Expanding urban areas not only removed people from nature in a literal sense, but also prevented them from experiencing the spiritual renewal offered by natural landscapes. Feminine Romanticism, in contrast, critiqued the patriarchy that permeated almost every working and social sphere operating throughout the Industrial Age.
Age, argued feminine Romantics, maintained its traditional patriarchal characteristics through the use of science. Female Romantic writers viewed science as another channel through which male figures “justified” their attempts to “conquer” and control Mother Nature. From the feminist perspective, asserts Mellor, *Frankenstein* is a “literary analysis of the psychology of modern ‘scientific’ man, of the dangers inherent in scientific research, and of the exploitation of nature and of the female implicit in a technological society” (*Mary Shelley* 38).

Victor’s scientific application of electricity reflects his desire to harness Nature and command her. Shelley’s relates Victor’s eagerness for power to the ancient Greek story of Prometheus. According to legend, Prometheus was a Titan who created humans. Feeling sympathy for the people’s lack of authority over animals, he stole fire from Mount Olympus, and against the will of Zeus, bestowed the gift of fire to mankind. Because of fire, mankind was able to rise above the beasts and gain superiority of the world (Bryan). *Frankenstein’s* subtitle is *The Modern Prometheus*. As Johnson points out, the novel “refers back to a myth that already links scientific ambivalence with the origin of mankind. Prometheus, the fire bringer, [is] the giver of both creation and destruction […].” During the Industrial Revolution, electricity served as the “modern” symbol of power that had “both wakened […] aspirations and frustrated [human beings], for it still belonged to the sky, to the gods, its sources mysterious, uncontrollable, healing and blasting arbitrarily” (Gaull 357). Victor represents Prometheus in that Victor uses a source of natural power to create life and destroy it in turn. In her negative portrayal of Victor, Shelley criticizes masculine Romanticism’s irrational desire for domination and exposes the danger of achieving power by exploiting the feminine domain of Nature.
Shelley displays Victor’s “fervent longing” to penetrate into the secrets of nature (25). He is driven by scientific curiosity. Victor states: “The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine. Curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature, gladness akin to rapture, as they were unfolded to me, are among the earliest sensations I can remember” (22). But Victor’s desire to understand nature is not limited to how nature is manifested in the physical world. He wants to gain knowledge beyond the capacities of mere mortals. He confesses: “It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn; and whether it was the outward substance of things, or the inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man that occupied me, still my inquiries were directed to the metaphysical, or, in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world” (23). His curiosity, coupled with pride, allows him to fantasize about the possibility of gaining divine power to dominate nature. From the beginning of the novel, Victor asserts that knowledge is the key which will open doors to governing nature, and curiosity serves as the vehicle in which to attain this knowledge.

*Frankenstein* clearly condemns Victor, a male scientist, for exploiting nature. Just as the High Romantics pursued the exalted state of mind promised by the sublime, Victor takes advantage of his natural surroundings, imprisons his resources in a man-made workshop, steals and usurps nature’s responsibility of imbuing life. The moment Victor accomplishes his goal of infusing life into his creation, he breaks the natural laws—Mother Nature’s laws. His behavior aligns with the ideological underpinnings of the High Romantics, who perceive nature as an object that can be used to fulfill the desire for power and transcendence. His actions, judged through the lens of the female Romantics, however, reveal his implicit disrespect for Nature. He uses the term “science” to justify his misuse of Nature’s resources, but at the heart of
his actions, he insults her. Victor’s motivation to build this creature is irrational and self-aggrandizing, and the outcome unpredictable, similar to the experience sought in the sublime. Victor, hiding under the title of “scientist,” continues to exploit Nature, a feminine domain, and eventually faces the consequences of doing so.

Ultimately, Victor longs to assume the role of a deity. As a young man, Victor admired how scientists “penetrate into the recesses of nature” and how they “ascend into the heavens: they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows” (33). This profession, believes Victor, is one which would give him not only insight but also authority over all aspects of nature. As Mellor explains, “Frankenstein in effect hopes to become God, the creator of life and the gratefully worshipped father of a new race of immortal beings. In his attempt to transform human beings into deities by eliminating mortality, Victor Frankenstein is himself participating in the mythopoeic vision that inspired the first generation of Romantic poets and thinkers” (Mary Shelley 70). The greatest accomplishment in dominating nature is challenging its boundary between life and death. Envisioning his superiority over Mother Nature, Victor admits: “Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs” (39). To become God would yield the greatest power over all things earthly and heavenly—a desire reflected in Victor’s irrational ambitions. Shelley exaggerates Victor’s scientific ambitions in order to
underscore her concerns about the dangers of science when it intervenes in natural processes instead of understanding and respecting all aspects of nature.

The ideals of masculine Romanticism favor power so strongly that those who seek such dominance also seek a status comparable to divinity, but masculine Romanticism forgets to see people as limited creatures who do not possess the capacity to achieve such ambitions. In his remorse, Victor proclaims, “I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind, and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror, such as the deed which he had now done, nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me” (60). Victor recognizes his inadequacies as a “Creator.” Initially eager to assume the role of God to bestow life, he confronts the reality of failures when his creation brings nothing but death. The creature describes his dreadful experience because of Victor’s unforeseen failure: “God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and abhorred” (115). Shelley uses Christian symbolism to demonstrate Victor’s unsuccessful attempt at undertaking a divine position. The creature insists that because Victor aspired to powers surpassing human ability, the creature’s happiness is sacrificed. To gain more control himself, the creature isolates Victor by murdering members Victor’s family members. He seeks to govern Victor: “Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master;--obey!”(152). Even though Victor is responsible for bringing the creature to life, he does not have any control whatsoever
over the creature’s free will. Physically stronger than Victor, the creature can easily subdue his creator, and this challenges the absolute power Victor originally believed he possessed. Distressed, the creature resorts to becoming “master” over his creator, and Victor also becomes a “slave” to his own obsession of trying to destroy the creature. The values of masculine Romanticism seduced Victor to aim for divine talents, but this impulse leads to a trail of tragic deaths.

While Shelley criticizes Victor’s domination over Mother Nature, she also links his actions with the literal destruction of the female figure. A whole series of female characters are left dead in the wake of Victor’s scientific pursuits. In the beginning of the novel, Victor’s mother dies. In a sense, Victor Frankenstein assumes the role of mother by giving life to the creature; the deaths of more females follow: Justine, the female mate, and then Elizabeth. The loss of the female creature and of Elizabeth emphasize the domineering character of masculine Romanticism. Literally, the obsession with power between the creature and Victor cause the death, or nonexistence, of the female entity. In the end, Victor and the Creature both die due to his initial longing for dominion over the natural environment. Through these losses, Shelley demonstrates the effects of a person’s lust for control. In masculine Romanticism, the underlying desire for power over nature, over all that is associated with the feminine domain, results in the ruin of all life.

Naturally, the desire for power is associated with the ego. Before his attempts to uncover the mysteries of life, Victor believes himself exceptional, for he considers himself capable of transcending natural laws. He thinks, “It was very different when the masters of the science sought immortality and power; such views, although futile, were grand: but now the scene was changed” (32). Victor claims that scientists in the past have sought such “immortality and power,” but he does not realize that he
similarly holds delusions of grandeur. Due to his narcissistic inclinations, Victor never questions whether he has any right to wield such authority. He does not want to create life because he believes he can offer a fulfilling existence to his creation. He reanimates flesh because he desires admiration for his role as creator. Victor’s motivations are shaped by his own egotistical need to be appreciated by another. The creature also expresses selfish characteristics which are manifested in strong emotions. The creature, so desperate for affection, seeks revenge when he does not obtain it. As Fay notes, his emotions “overwhelm the ability of society to meet those needs, until he is driven to destroy every example of domestic harmony he encounters. Both mothers and entire families suffer from an individual’s extreme egotism, and Shelley’s creature is particularly driven to destroy the family belonging to his ‘mother,’ Victor Frankenstein” (196). Both Victor and his creation become absorbed in their mutual self particularly during the last couple of chapters in the novel. The power dynamic between them is not clear, for each tries to become the master over the other, but their pursuit of control leads only to death.

Victor Frankenstein serves as Shelley’s symbol of the dangers of the masculine attempt to penetrate and govern nature, but she also offers feminine Romanticism’s alternative perspective on the proper relationship between humans and their natural environment. Feminine Romanticism does not view nature as an entity to be conquered. Rather, a person must approach nature with respect and appreciation. Instead of seeking power, feminine Romantics favored harmonious relations between masculine and feminine forces—forces that are exemplified in the domestic sphere. Mellor explains that “the women writers of the Romantic era offered an alternative program grounded on the trope of the family-politic, on the idea of a nation-state that
evolves gradually and rationally under the mutual care and guidance of both mother and father” (*Romanticism* 65).

Feminine Romanticism advocates for a restrained mind instead of fervent curiosity. Victor’s father, a proponent of feminine Romanticism, advises against investigating too deeply into nature’s secrets: “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” (40). For Victor, the desire for knowledge transforms into a passionate curiosity, which destroys a calm mind. Early on, Victor warns Walton: “Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow” (38). Just before he dies, he instructs Walton to “[s]eek happiness in tranquility and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries” (199). Victor’s discussions with Walton reveal his regret for pursuing knowledge with the aim of achieving personal glory and power over nature. According to Mellor, feminine Romanticism insisted that “nature is not an overwhelming power, not even an all-bountiful mother. Instead nature is a female friend, a sister, with whom they share their most intimate experiences and with whom they cooperate in the daily business of life, to the mutual advantage of each” (*Romanticism* 97).

Masculine Romanticism’s veneration for domination is concerned with the self, but feminine Romanticism prefers mutual respect among every member in a relationship regardless of gender. Mellor elaborates that female Romantics “promoted a politics of gradual rather than violent social change, a social change that extends the
values of domesticity into the public realm” (3). Mary Shelley presents feminine Romanticism’s value for the domestic life through Elizabeth. Referring to his bouts of strong emotion, Victor confesses, “Elizabeth alone had the power to draw me from these fits; her gentle voice would soothe me when transported by passion, and inspire me with human feelings when sunk in torpor. She wept with me and for me. When reason returned she would remonstrate and endeavor to inspire me with resignation” (174). Elizabeth grounds Victor to the virtues of home-life. When she is his company, Victor does not feel the need to gain control. In fact, he appreciates the genuine acceptance she offers, and he acquires a more contented disposition. During his struggle for dominance over the creature, Victor states, “[There was] one consolation for my unparalleled sufferings; it was the prospect of that day when, enfranchised from my miserable slavery, I might claim Elizabeth, and forget the past in my union with her” (138). Victor's desire for marriage, the ultimate symbol of domesticity, is what eases his turmoil while he is the creature’s “slave.” When Victor is the one being dominated, he is miserable. The thoughts that relieve his sorrows are of home-life and a mutually loving union with Elizabeth. Victor suffers as he follows the ideals of masculine Romanticism, but he finds joy in domestic principles.

In conclusion, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein continues to spark intrigue in its readers. Addressing multiple social and political themes, the novel not only entertains us with a captivating story of a man who creates life in a laboratory but it also gives insight into Shelley’s outlook on gender ideologies during the Romantic period. Mellor paves the way for future scholars to explore even further these two prominent ideologies, feminine and masculine Romanticism, in Romantic literary works. Because of Mellor’s contributions, I was able to recognize Shelley’s critique of masculine Romanticism’s ideals and her promotion of values advocated by feminine
Romanticism. In particular, excessive emotion, search for the sublime, and the desire for domination are masculine Romantic ideals that promote the characters’ egocentrism and lead to their downfalls. Simultaneously, Shelley advocates feminine Romanticism’s ideals of a rational mind, the nurturing effects of nature’s beauty, and a respectable relationship with nature that extends into mutual affections within the domestic household. Mellor’s work allows us to challenge the conventional understanding of Romanticism and reevaluate the themes behind literature’s most famous Romantic works.
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