Frankenstein: The Dangers of Self-Education

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft argues in favour of the education of women by declaring that educated women, understanding the importance of their role, will better perform their domestic duties, which will benefit both their families and their nation. Wollstonecraft outlines an institution of education in which educated mothers, being patriots themselves, will teach their children to serve the nation, for the greater moral good and the progress of knowledge. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, these institutions are either missing or incomplete, such that the male characters are forced to self-educate, leading to a male thirst for knowledge and discovery that is unmediated by a moral education. As Wollstonecraft's highest moral good represents the good of the nation, and it is the mother's role to impart this lesson onto her children, it is the absence of female educators in *Frankenstein* that adds to the destructive nature of these pursuits of glory and identity. This is represented in the narratives of Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the creature, as the novel supports the idea that Wollstonecraft's institutions of education are necessary for the good of the individual, the domestic family, and the nation.

*Frankenstein* opens with Robert Walton, who is going on a voyage to the Arctic and has had to teach himself everything he knows about seafaring, and whose obsessive pursuit of glory puts in danger the lives of the crew and threatens to disrupt the domestic order of those of them who have families. The aim of this expedition is scientific and colonial discovery: he wishes to find the source of magnetism, new land, and faster routes to countries that are difficult to reach by sea. It is not an education by his parents or any institution that has led him to this voyage: he cites that his "education was neglected, yet [he] was passionately fond of reading" (Shelley 8). Walton's father goes as far as to leave instructions on his deathbed that Walton should not be
allowed to undertake expeditions at sea: it is this dismissal by his father, seemingly without justification, that leads Walton down the path of uncontrolled self-education. As such, Walton educates himself in "the history of all the voyages made for the purposes of discovery" (8). He continues this pattern of self-education as he gains experience at sea, devoting his nights to "the study of mathematics, the theory of medicine, and those branches of physical science from which a naval adventurer might derive the greatest practical advantage" (8-9). All the knowledge that Walton employs in his quest for scientific and colonial discovery is self-taught, and therefore, unmediated by any sense of moral responsibility. The result of this is Walton's self-serving reason for his journey: although Walton describes in his letters his excitement at the potential for scientific and colonial discovery, ultimately it is clear that he is on a quest for personal glory. He describes himself as "[preferring] glory to every enticement that wealth placed in [his] path", and later accuses his men of not appreciating the honour and glory of their voyage when they want to turn back (9). His thoughts do not align with expanding scientific knowledge for any national interest, but remain stuck on his own wish to prove himself, especially as the novel progresses. Victor warns the men not to "return to [their] families with the stigma of disgrace marked on [their] brows [but instead] as heroes who have fought and conquered…” (155). However, it seems likely that they will die if they continue this voyage. Wollstonecraft's moral good aligns with the good of the domestic family and the good of the nation: drowning in the arctic and abandoning the families of these sailors does not serve the interest of the nation. As Walton's mother is unmentioned, it is unlikely that she had a part in his education, and as it is the mother's duty to teach morality and patriotism to her children, the absence of these qualities in Walton is unsurprising. Walton fails to consider the good of the families of the sailors and the good of the nation, and subsequently fails in his objective.
Meanwhile, Victor Frankenstein educates himself in the natural sciences, and his drive to discover the source of the generation of life and then apply this knowledge puts himself and his family in mortal danger, as he immorally abandons his creation. In his childhood, his father is the primary educator of the family, having "relinquished many of his public employments, and devoted himself to the education of his children" (19). This education is unconventional, in the sense that Victor and Elizabeth are not forced to emulate what they are taught, but to apply that knowledge with some kind of purpose in mind. Already, Victor's parents, described as "indulgent", are not setting any boundaries for their children (21). When Victor uncovers the book by Cornelius Agrippa and brings it to his father, his father looks at it carelessly and calls it trash: noticeably, Victor as the narrator holds the father at least partly responsible for the events that follow, for not taking the time to redirect Victor's attention "to useful knowledge", as this would have led Victor to discard the book (22). Instead, as a result of this dismissal, Victor resorts to educating himself in the natural sciences, which become his obsession. Even as M. Krempe exclaims over the poor and outdated education that Victor has given himself, and Victor is educated in 'modern' science, he remains fixated on the past and states wistfully that "it was very different, when the masters of science sought immortality and power: such views, although futile, were grand…” (28). However, Victor's father is not the only one who fails in his education: while his father directs their studies, their mother only "[partakes] of their enjoyment" (25). In Wollstonecraft's framework, it is the mother's duty to teach her children to be patriots, to serve their family and their nation. Essentially, mothers impart a moral education onto their children, and, in doing this, shape their identities. His mother's lack of participation in educating her children, and her death, is reflective of the general lack of mothers in this novel, and the lack of morality that follows from this.
This combination of his father's dismissal of Victor's interests and his mother's failure to impart morality onto her children culminates in Victor's total disregard for his responsibilities to his family and his nation while he is searching for "the cause of generation and life" (32). He describes his scientific pursuits as being so enticing that he does not visit his family for over two years, utterly neglecting his duties in the domestic sphere. He ignores the potential consequences that this meddling with life could have to the nation, and he does not consider the ethical problems associated with this science, even as his own human nature often "turn[s] with loathing from [his] occupation" (34). He is obsessed with applying his new knowledge of the source of life in an effort to break the bounds of life and death, wishing to eliminate the latter entirely. All the while, Victor's focus remains wholly on the potential glory of this scientific discovery, and on the gratitude that the new species will bestow upon him as their "creator and source" (33).

Victor as the narrator interjects again to tell Walton (and the reader) that any study that weakens your affections and disenchants you of other activities that might bring you pleasure "is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind", admitting that this scientific pursuit, and the feverish way in which he applies himself to his task, are unlawful (34). This process of creation is framed as a result of Victor's lack of restraint: the male thirst for discovery, as it is portrayed in Frankenstein, leads to "unlawful" science when unmediated by direction and moral education. This immorality manifests itself symbolically in the creature's demonic appearance. The creature, who is repeatedly paralleled with the biblical figure Adam, is made in the "image" of his creator, or more specifically, in the image of the process of his creation, which was unlawful. Faced with the physical expression of his work, whose ugliness reflects the "evil" of his science, Victor is unable to take responsibility for his actions and runs away. Immediately following this scene, Victor dreams of Elizabeth turning into his dead mother. If, in the structure
of education, women are supposed to impart morality onto their children, then this is symbolic of Victor facing the death of his own morality, and foreshadows the deaths that will result from his immoral choices. Later, when Victor meets his creation in the woods, knowing that the creature has killed Victor's younger brother, Victor threatens to kill him, and the creature accuses Victor of "[sporting] with life" (68). This accusation applies not only to his death threat, but to Victor having generated life in a being he assembled out of corpses, essentially becoming both mother and father to this new species, and then failing to uphold both of those roles when he abandoned the creature.

Victor's abandonment of his role as mother and father to the creature leads to the largest project of self-education in the novel: having come to life with but the knowledge and awareness of a human newborn, the creature educates himself largely through experience and observation. Alone in the forest, the creature must determine through experimentation which food to cook and discovers firsthand the burning heat of fire. Higher learning comes later, when, after several disastrous encounters with humans, the creature stumbles upon a family of cottagers, and begins the process of learning human language. This is taught to him indirectly, as he observes through a gap in the wall as the cottagers communicate with one another. Soon, he discovers "signs" that correspond to speech, and longs to gain understanding of these as well. The creature's desire to be educated is explicitly linked to his longing to belong to a community, and to his wish to understand his identity, both of which Victor could have provided him with, had Victor not abandoned him. The creature knows nothing of his own history, and can only define himself against the human family he is observing, leading him to wonder if he is "a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned" (83). The creature does not have an identity, and therefore, has no purpose or place in society, and he can only philosophize
on his status as an outsider. Soon after, the creature finds a backpack filled with classic literature, and, having learned to understand the "signs", begins to educate himself using these texts. The book that has the largest impact on his education is *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton, which he takes to be a human history. Having this novel as a comparison to his own situation, the creature begins to identify himself in terms of whether he is acting as the "Adam" figure or the "Satan" figure of his own narrative. However, having rediscovered Victor's notes on the process of creating him, the creature begins to think of himself as being even more wretched than Satan, lamenting that "God in pity made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but [the creature's] form is a filthy type of [Victor's], more horrid from its very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but [the creature is] solitary and detested" (91). As the creature discovers the process from which he was made, he continues to speak in the language of the fall, noting that he is a "filthy type" of Victor's form: like God, Adam, and Satan, the creature feels that he was made in Victor's image, but is an ugly version of him. He fantasizes about having companionship and sympathy, in the form of his own 'Eve', with whom he could share their own version of Paradise. In spite of knowing his true origin, the creature never escapes this reaction to qualify his identity using *Paradise Lost*: as he himself explains, "[knowledge] clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it…" (83). In this way, the creature exhibits similar qualities to his creator, as the knowledge that they taught themselves clings to their minds, even after others "correct" their way of thinking.

Essentially, the creature's need to discover his own identity, after Victor fails in his duty to educate him, forces him into a binary of Adam versus Satan, which results in the murder of most of Victor's family. Like Adam, the creature asks his creator to give him a partner, stating that they will "make [their] bed of dried leaves; the sun will shine on [them] as on man, and will
ripen [their] food" and arguing that this picture is "peaceful and human" and that it would be cruel to deprive the creature of this happiness (103). The creature desires Victor's validation of his identity as "Adam", and his 'Eve' is presented as a taming force, as the creature's choice to hide from society in peace rather than committing more murders hinges on her presence. This is in agreement with the idea that it is women who are responsible for bringing stability and morality to male desire, as Wollstonecraft's mothers do when they impart morality onto their children. However, Victor rejects this identity by refusing to create a partner for the creature, and the creature reverts to using the language of Satan, saying that if he "cannot inspire love, [he] will cause fear", and will work to destroy Victor until Victor regrets having been born (102). This is an echo of Satan's speech in *Paradise Lost*, in which he swears that he will destroy every one of God's beautiful creations. The creature's self-education only presented him with two possible identities, and as the creature himself stated, this knowledge lingers in his mind. In the last of Victor's narration, he describes the creature as being eloquent and persuasive, with a soul "as hellish as his form, full of treachery and fiend-like malice", showing that the creature has fully assumed the identity of Satan, regardless of the immorality of his actions (150). Although the creature initially displays a capacity for sympathy and moral behavior, as he ceases to steal food from the cottagers after discovering their poverty, when killing Victor's family he is hurried on by a "frightful selfishness" even as his heart is "poisoned with remorse" (158). Without parental guidance, specifically from a mother figure, the creature lacks a moral education, and does not learn that conscience and remorse should overpower cruelty. "Evil thenceforth [becomes his] good", and like Satan, the creature makes a heaven of his own hell (159).

As such, the self-education practiced by the male characters in *Frankenstein* stems from the inadequacy of their male educators, and the lack of female educators altogether. Specifically,
as per Wollstonecraft's structure of education, it is the lack of mothers that leads to the absence of morality in this novel. *Frankenstein* makes it clear that the pursuit of knowledge and discovery, when undirected by educational institutions and unmediated by moral education, is dangerous to the individual, the domestic family, and the nation.
Works Cited
