PARENT-CHILD TENSIONS IN FRANKENSTEIN: 
THE SEARCH FOR COMMUNION

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The rights of kings are deduced in a direct line from the king of Kings, 
and that of parents from our first parent. 
Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

Everything must have a beginning. . . . And that beginning must be 
linked to something that went before. 
Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

Surely no one needs to be reminded that Frankenstein is a book largely 
reminiscent of Mary Shelley’s own troubled family relationships; and in sup-
port of the point, one need only turn to George Levin and U. C. 
Knoepflmacher’s excellent collection of essays, The Endurance of Frankenstein, 
to find the matter well documented.¹ That an author’s life becomes translat-
ed into her fiction is hardly news on any account. But what has somehow 
eluded proper treatment is the resultant real subject of this “monster tale”: 
the failure of human beings to “parent” their offspring in such a way that 
they will be able to take part in society rather than retreat into themselves.

An emphasis upon the proper assumption of parental responsibilities was 
part of the age: Maria Edgeworth and Hannah More had, through their educa-
tional treatises, influenced Walter Scott’s Waverley themes, and Mary Shel-
ley in turn bowed in his direction by allowing her husband to send him 
presentation volumes of Frankenstein the month the novel was published 
anonymously. The romantic educators typically placed the blame for an 
adolescent’s misconduct at the door of a negligent (though often well-meaning) 
parent. Shelley herself subtly indict[s] Victor’s parents in exactly this way; 
and she suggests an even subtler subtext of family conflict in the letters 
Walton writes to Margaret. Previous commentators have, of course, noted

[14]
Frankenstein’s abuse of his monster; strangely enough, however, they have tended to ignore the precedent within his own family for Victor’s later actions, as well as the familial tensions that Walton. Victor’s shadow self, implies. Such critical shortsightedness has inevitable resulted in textual analyses that fail to account for the complexity of this novel.

Readers have quite correctly assumed the statement in Shelley’s preface, ‘‘my chief concern has been to exhibit the amiableness of domestic affection and the excellence of universal virtues’’ to be a cover-up; but in ascribing to Mary Shelley a need to deny the ugliness of a nightmarish vision they have missed her real subterfuge.2 She will indeed concern herself with ‘‘domestic affection’’—but more precisely, the lack of it, and how such a lack undermines ‘‘universal virtue.’’3 In Shelley’s attention to parent-child relationships, she implies a far-ranging application to society at large: if we fail at this most primal unit of communication, what hope is there for compassionate interaction within the larger community? Shelley insists that man can live only through communion with others; solitude, for her, represents death.

Through his continual exaggerations of familial love, Victor Frankenstein reveals to us the inadequacy of the homelife that belies his oft-fevered protestations of attachment. Perhaps the inevitable ambivalence concerning our own childhood creates a suspension of critical acuity in our reading Victor’s story, but a close study of the text undercuts severely his insistence upon the perfect home. Critics have generally fallen for his defenses: Kate Ellis basically accepts his myth of the happy home;4 Gubar and Gilbert call his childhood, in Miltonic terms, Edenic.5 Only Christopher Small suggests that in Victor’s description there is a ‘‘strained emphasis on felicity.’’6

That Victor insists upon remembering ‘‘the best of all possible worlds’’ is the psychological defense of an only child (as he was for a long time) who maintains a love/hate relationship with his parents because he senses that they share an affection that in some way excludes him.7 Victor is an object of their love, not a participant in it; he is ‘‘their plaything and their idol’’ (p. 33). In his recollections of his parents’ relationship—recollections more fully developed in the 1831 edition—he emphasizes their devotion to each other, to the (implicit) detriment of their child. If, as Victor claims, everything was centered on fulfilling the mother’s wishes, one must wonder at the son’s extravagant account of the love left over for him: ‘‘they seemed to draw inexhaustible stores of affection from a very mine of love to bestow them upon me’’ (p. 33). The narrator strains his credibility too far when he assures us that ‘‘every hour of my infant life I received a lesson of patience, of charity, and of self-control’’ (p. 34)—precisely those virtues that the young adult scientist will lack. After being told that ‘‘for a long time I was their only care,’’ we are to believe that the addition of Elizabeth to his little
family effected nothing but unqualified joy. There is no mention of the inevita-
ble sibling friction; instead, these siblings were "strangers to any species of
disunion or disrepute. Harmony was the soul of companionship..." (p. 
36). Frankenstein early on models upon his parents as Elizabeth becomes his 
plaything. His mother tells him, "I have a pretty present for my Victor—
to-morrow he shall have it" (p. 35, emphasis mine). The child subsequently 
accepts Elizabeth as his "promised gift" and makes her his own possession.

We misread the story (and many have) if we listen to Victor's hyperbolic 
descriptions of a family idyll without attuning our ears to the subtext. When, 
for instance, Henry Clerval asks Victor if they might talk "on an important 
subject" and Victor reacts with some anxiety, his friend quickly surmises 
that the scientist might be fearful to speak of his own home. Before proceeding, 
Clerval reassures his friend: "I will not mention it if it agitates you; but your 
father and cousin... hardly know how ill you have been and are uneasy 
your long silence" (p. 63). Victor responds: "How could you suppose that 
my first thought would not fly towards those dear, dear friends whom I love 
and who are so deserving of my love?" Both Clerval and the readers have 
some reason to doubt Victor's insistence. At this point in the narrative, he 
has not been home for five years; he will finally return home after yet anoth-
er year passes, when he is summoned by his father upon William's death. 
Consequently, though he proclaims in frenzied terms that he loves his family 
"to adoration," we suspect that ambivalence, at the least, subverts his affection.

It is not only Victor who has troubled connections with his family; 
rather, we are in a world where parental irresponsibility and failure are the 
rule. Beaufort's pride puts his daughter in a difficult position; Safie's inter-
est are betrayed by her father; Elizabeth is left an orphan; Justine's father 
dies and leaves his favorite at the mercy of a hard mother; and Henry Clerval's 
father attempts to keep him from the academic life he yearns to pursue. But 
more important than any family conflicts outside of the protagonist's is Walton's 
relationship to Margaret, that maternal sister who has apparently failed to be 
responsive to her younger brother's needs. He somewhat cynically reminds 
her, for instance, that of his efforts at poetry, she is "well acquainted with 
my failure and how heavily I bore the disappointment" (p. 17); and then, 
when discussing his latest venture, he implores: "And now, dear Margaret, 
do I not deserve to accomplish some great purpose... Oh, that some 
encouraging voice could answer in the affirmative!" (p. 17). Upon close 
reading we sense a compulsion on Walton's part to prove himself to Margaret; 
and if we ignore this underlying theme, as critics traditionally have done, we 
miss the emphasis in the novel on the murky undercurrents of what look at 
first glance to be straightforward parent-child relationships. In one sense, 
then, Victor's exaggerated (and therefore unmistakable) neglect of his progeny 
serves merely as a bolder-than-life projection of the novel's other, more 
oblique family conflicts.
The parental failures are emblematic for those people unwilling to fulfill their duties to society at large: just as the hunter, that mythical image of a strong and protective father, reacts incorrectly and injures his charge's rescuer, so even the priestly fathers respond insensitively to their children's needs.\textsuperscript{8} Justine's callous mother follows her confessor's advice in removing her daughter from the surrogate family where she is happy (p. 66); and when Justine is accused of murdering William, her priest helps condemn this innocent by threatening her into a false confession of guilt (p. 87). Even the De Laceys, who represent the family most at ease with itself, fail; De Lacey, a parent who is treated with the greatest deference and respect, responds compassionately to Frankenstein's child because he is blind and therefore not prejudiced by appearances. It is, ironically, when his sighted children return that the old man excludes the monster from a chance of kinship; it is when his children enable their father to "see through their eyes" that he loses his own visionary powers.

If, as Ellen Moers has suggested, "most of the novel—two of the three volumes, can be said to deal with the retribution visited upon the monster and creator for deficient infant care,\textsuperscript{9} it is also true that inadequate parental guidance in later years leaves its mark on Victor Frankenstein. The young scientist is thirteen, on the threshold of adolescence, when the struggle to break free of his parents and to become his own man begins in earnest. Not all fathers welcome their child's ascendant power, with its accompanying suggestion that their own is on the wane. Mary Shelley implicates this tension through her fascination with "the tale of the sinful founder of his race whose miserable doom it was to bestow the kiss of death on all the younger sons of his fated house, just when they reached the age of promise" (p. 7). She revised the second version of her novel to emphasize Victor's lack of guidance at this important formative stage; the first version allows the elder Frankenstein to share his son's interest in science, whereas in the second, Victor is left on his own.\textsuperscript{10} In fact, when the exuberant youth tries to discuss his reading with his father, Alphonse Frankenstein carelessly glances at the title page and exclaims, "My dear Victor, do not waste your time upon this; it is sad trash" (p. 39). In one of Victor's rare insightful reflections, he explicitly criticizes his father's execution of his parental role: "If ... my father had taken the pains to explain to me [modern science] ... it is even possible that ... my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin" (p. 39). Instead, he was abandoned "to struggle with a child's blindness ..." (p. 39). Finally, he is left mulling "a thousand contradictory theories and floundering desperately in a very slough of multifarious knowledge," guided by "childish reasoning" (p. 40).

John Dussinger has perceptively suggested that Frankenstein's academic pursuit is a rebellion against the moral obligations between father and son: "The center of evil is parental irresponsibility and selfishness, and the ideal
of goodness is the father’s bond to his son and the reciprocal bond of son to father.” Before there can be an interplay of love between father and child, the father has to fulfill his duties, a contract Mary Shelley well knew from her mother’s writings. She also understood the pain of being rejected when her activities earned her father’s disapproval, such as his refusal to see her after her marriage to Shelley or his callous warning not to grieve in excess for her dead child, lest she lose the love of those close to her.

Just as William Godwin steamrolled over his daughter’s sensibilities, so Alphonse Frankenstein too was insensitive to his son. Victor implies, for example, that his father insists that he depart for Ingolstadt soon after his mother’s death, away from the sympathy of his native country and into new, strange surroundings with no one to guide him. There is the suggestion that Alphonse disapproves of his son’s grief as a dilatory tactic. In fact, strong sense of parental disapproval informs the father/son reactions throughout the novel. Indeed, as Victor describes his father, we come to see a parent who loves only conditionally: his justice is a “virtue” which renders it necessary “that he should approve highly to love strongly” (p. 33).

The need to win approval from judgmental parents can at times compel the child toward excellence; but it can also be perverted into disastrous extremes, in which the child transforms his Promethean aspirations for success into those of overreaching and surpassing his parents at the cost of everything else. Victor has ambitiously planned that “a new species would bless me as its creator and source. . . . No father would claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs.” That after the “birth” he feels “guilty of a crime” comes, therefore, as no surprise to us—he has usurped his father’s place in the hierarchy. No wonder then that he finds his interior self “in a state of insurrection and turmoil” (p. 48). His father had taken great precautions to ensure that his son disdain supernatural horrors (p. 55); yet, regardless of his disclaimer of responsibility for his creation, Frankenstein deliberately chose the form for his creature that was sure to provoke the most horror and dread in other mortals. Harold Bloom typifies those readers who gloss over Frankenstein’s foreknowledge of his creature’s ugliness, when he asserts: “the hideousness of his creature was no part of Victor Frankenstein’s intention . . .”13 Instead, we must read Victor’s shock at his child’s ugliness as mere repression of the truth, as he unwittingly admits: “I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then . . .” (p. 58, emphasis mine).

Victor compensates for the sense of smallness his father has imparted by usurping his parents’ powers as creators, but also by issuing forth a child whose physical nature will be inferior, in size, to no one. He acts out his anger at his family in an attempt to affirm his own selfhood. Just as he threw the door open to find “a spectre,” so he exorcises the wolf under his bed, the parent as evil predator, by creating his own nightmare come true.14 He recognizes from his progeny’s first murderous act that the monster’s destruct-
tion is his own: "I was the true murderer" (p. 89). By the end of the novel he has acknowledged that he is responsible for all the deaths. He admits: "I abhorred the face of man," a statement he fearfully retracts with "oh, not abhorred! . . . I felt attracted even to the most repulsive among them . . ." (pp. 184-85), a reflection we can hardly credit. Instead, his exclamation that he has turned a murderer loose upon society (p. 200) indicates the truer self-knowledge.

But Frankenstein is not alone in needing to dethrone his parents. Walton, that too often forgotten character who frames the novel subtly strikes out at Margaret, the sister who helped rear him. He reminds his sister again and again of his imminent destruction, and he presages pain for her whatever the outcome of his "voyage of discovery," as he continually alludes to his journey: "If I succeed, many years will pass before meeting again; if I fail, you will never see me again" (p. 18). In a sense he tries to "kill" his parent too, in tones redolent of the monster: "You will have visitings of despair, and yet be tortured by hope" (pp. 212-13).

Margaret, his mother substitute, has regarded his voyage with evil forebodings (p. 15), but Walton insists on his vision: "you cannot contest the inestimable benefits which I shall confer on all mankind, to the last generation . . ." (p. 16). Since learning of his father's injunction against a seafaring life, the son has waited for his chance to disobey: "the favorite dream of my early years was this voyage" (p. 16). Walton's very uneasy relationship with his sister has been too often overlooked; his letters to her are usually thinly veiled threats to her power, attempts to assert his own autonomy. Indeed, this "voyage of discovery" is, for him, a fight, in the Ericksonian schema, between dependence and autonomy, an effort on his part to determine his relationship to the rest of society. If he, in the end, falls short of the godlike aspirations that, he emphasizes, "lift his soul to heaven," he will also turn back, however reluctantly, toward a finally integrated relationship between parent and child. Walton will "grow up," affirm himself, and return to his community, unlike his counterpart, that "soul mate" in whom he so rightly sees his own potential reflected.

II

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me Man, did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?
*Paradise Lost*, x, 743-45
(epigraph to *Frankenstein*)

Victor Frankenstein's role as father is intensified by that fulfillment of every parent's dream: he can deliberately, knowingly create his child; he can
actually choose the parts. It is especially ironic, then, that he hates what he sees. Victor produces such a grotesque model for his procreation in part as a response to his own aggressive feelings toward his parents and the guilt these emotions provoke. He is anxious throughout the gestation period: “Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever, and I became nervous to a most painful degree” (p. 56). Consequently, he has geared himself to hate and fear his creature. In one sense, the ugliness affords him an escape from parental responsibilities; he can justify his immediate flight. After proving his godlike power to produce life, he is then able immediately to abandon it.

It is not, however, that Victor Frankenstein is unaware of familial connection to his monster; he feels what the duties of a “creator towards the creature” are, but he nonetheless makes no attempt to satisfy the monster’s needs. He recognizes, “I ought to [have rendered] him happy before I complained of his wickedness” (p. 102). At one point the monster’s tale of his life allows Frankenstein to offer his conditional concern, judging, in the manner of his father, his progeny worthy of attention: “His tale, and the feelings he now expressed, proved him to be a creature of fine sensations; and did I not as his maker, owe him, all the portion of happiness that it was in my power to bestow?” (p. 146). He continues to fail his creature, however, never gaining insight into the monster’s tortured psyche, so that at the end of the novel he is able to exclaim without irony: “Let the cursed and hellish monster drink deep of agony; let him feel the despair that now torments me” (p. 202).

In noting Frankenstein’s brutal disregard of any parental duties, we should recall his analysis of his parents’ reaction to him as a child: “It was in their hands to direct to happiness or misery, according as they fulfilled their duties to me.” They had a “deep consciousness of what they owed towards the being to which they had given life . . .” (p. 34). In reality, however, his parents had regarded him as a plaything, a bauble (p. 33); and so Frankenstein views his creation as an object of his pleasure, until the “newborn” forces his way into his parent’s consciousness.

It is also worth noting here that Mary Shelley began her writing with Chapter 4, wherein we see the father rejecting the monster’s outstretched hand.17 The monster labors under no delusion that he is loved: “You, my own creator, detest and spurn me . . .” (p. 99). In response to the monster’s pain, his father notices that “his countenance bespoke bitter anguish,” but its “unearthly ugliness rendered it almost too horrible for human eyes” (p. 99). The monster’s “deal”—“Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you . . .” (p. 99)—resonates with the sound of Mary Wollstonecraft’s parental advice: “A right always includes a duty, and I think it may likewise fairly be inferred that they forfeit the right who do not fulfill the duty.”18 Since Frankenstein does not act out his proper role, his creature condemns him as “the author at once of my existence and its unspeakable torments”. 
(p. 220). It is no coincidence that the portrait of Caroline kneeling, in agony, by her father’s coffin is echoed at the novel’s end, where the monster, in his own agony of despair, hangs over his dead father and utters exclamations of grief and horror. Caroline’s beauty ensures that her portrait will elicit a strong sympathy from Frankenstein, but the monster has no such saving grace. Thus, with his arm extended yet again to his maker, he admits the impossibility of contact.

To substitute for the lack of human connection, the monster revels in self-education. He recognizes the wonders of speech, in which, unlike those around him, he locates mysterious powers. Viewing language as “a godlike science” (p. 112), he pays rapt attention to the lessons Felix offers to Safie. Through the De Lacey’s he learns that man is “at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base” (p. 119). Unlike his creator, who ponders meaning only insofar as its suggests power, the monster learns what life is about. He absorbs Felix’s lessons. “I can hardly describe to you the effect of these books. They produced in me an infinity of new images and feelings . . .” (p. 128). His lessons lead him, finally, to that question of intense psychological importance, without which the child never becomes the man; he tells his “father” that he finally asked himself “Who was I?” (p. 128). “The path of my departure was free; and there was none to lament my annihilation. . . . What was I? . . . What was my destination?” (p. 128). It is worth quoting here at length from Bruno Bettelheim’s analogous description of a child’s self-discovery.

The child asks himself: “Who am I? Where did I come from? . . . He worries not whether there is justice for individual man, but whether he will be treated justly. He wonders who or what projects him into adversity, and what can prevent this from happening to him. Are there benevolent powers in addition to his parents? Are his parents benevolent powers? How should he form himself, and why? Is there hope for him though he may have done wrong? Why has all this happened to him?”

The tragedy is that for this introspective wanderer, the world will not support his answer; he will be answered only “with groans” (p. 121). Psychiatrist Selma Fraiberg, in Every Child’s Birthright, writes that the unnurtured, unloved child grows into the aberrant adult—the criminal who seeks to negate his overwhelming sense of nothingness by inflicting pain on others—a scream that “I exist, I am.” It is not, then, the monster’s nature that makes him so vengeful, as his creator deludes himself into thinking, but rather his overwhelming sense of isolation and despair at lacking human connections that in fact his father should have first provided. At the time of his first violent act, he is merely seeking fellowship with another human, and he assumes little William, the “beautiful child” so unlike himself, to be too young to have formed prejudices based on appearance. Enraged to the point of murder,
he is motivated by a combination of being rejected by one so young and finding that the child, related to the monster’s creator, is yet another agent of sorrow by the scientist’s hand. Similarly, he strikes out at Justine because she represents to him the relationships he can never have: her condemnation will therefore be “just” because “the crime had its source in her; be hers the punishment” (p. 144). By issuing the ultimatum to Frankenstein, “On you it rests, whether I quit . . . man and lead a harmless life, or become the scourge of your fellow creatures” (p. 101), the monster places the blame for his aggression where it properly lies. Frankenstein refuses the responsibility, and so, as U. C. Knoepflmacher observes in a different context, “The monster becomes father to the man and relentlessly imposes on its creator the same conditions of dependence and insecurity that it was made to suffer.”

In a last desperate attempt to evoke a one-to-one response, the monster forces his master into the Arctic race where he assures Frankenstein, “You will feel the misery of cold and frost, to which I am impassive” (p. 204). The cold serves as a metaphor for the comfortless, solitary life he has led, one he is bent on recreating for the agent of his pain. We become intensely, painfully aware of the monster’s motivation for his aggression through the death scene of his father. Through the grief and horror at his successful patricidal act emerges the typical, unfathomable loyalty of the abused child: “Oh, Frankenstein! Generous and self-devoted being! I . . . destroyed thee by destroying all thou lovedst.” But the larger, more deadly truth about this “self-devoted being” is unwittingly echoed in his child’s last suffocated observation: “Alas! He is cold, he cannot answer me” (p. 219).

III

In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration. The interest of work in common would not hold it together; instinctual passions are stronger than reasonable interests. Civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man’s aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestations of them in check by psychical reaction-formations.

Sigmund Freud, Civilization and Its Discontents

Of major significance in the struggle between Frankenstein and his monster are the efforts of the creator to escape his place in society, in contrast to the desperate attempts of the created to become situated within it. Frankenstein relates that his early life was passed in considerable seclusion; that it became his temper to avoid a crowd, a withdrawal making him “indifferent,” therefore, to his “school-fellows in general” (p. 37). His apprehension at leaving his “amiable companions” of the hearth for the new territory of Ingolstadt is well founded, since he will be more alone here than ever. He creates his
monster in solitude; and after the monster kills William, the scientist can justify his alienation from mankind by reason of his grief. He now shuns the face of man: "all sound of joy or complacency was torture to me; solitude was my only consolation—deep, dark, deathlike solitude" (p. 90). His father senses a hidden meaning to his son's withdrawal, ostensibly due to his mourning, and warns him that "excessive sorrow prevents improvement of enjoyment, or even the discharge of daily usefulness, without which no man is fit for society" (p. 91). The truth is the blunt reality previously noted: "I abhorred society." Victor wishes to pass his life on that "barren rock" (p. 169) where he will be uninterrupted by the pain of human contact; in contrast with Prometheus, whose bondage was a sacrificial act for the good of all mankind, Frankenstein wants to protect himself from the weariness of social intercourse.

In direct opposition to his maker, the monster longs for society and sympathy. He quickly becomes aware that there is no place for him, that he has been forbidden all that society holds dear: wealth and connections. If his own creator withholds from him human contact, he can expect nothing more from the rest of his world. He realizes: "No sympathy may I ever find." Though his vain efforts to assert his selfhood through aggressive acts have ruined him, he realizes his depravity is the fault of man: "the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil. Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am alone." All humankind has sinned against him (p. 221). In the tradition of those who, regardless of their sins, know passion and thus know life, the monster will exult in self-destruction by fire. Frankenstein instead will die passively, "a fit end for a being who has never achieved a full sense of another's existence."23

If Mary Shelley offers us both Frankenstein and his monster as societal members who serve only to subvert civilization, she suggest in Robert Walton a resolution of the conflict between ambition and the need for intimacy which will result in a balanced world. Walton knows from the beginning of his trip that he is undergoing a rite of passage, a journey of discovery. We recognize a potential Frankenstein, another man ill at ease with family life, seeking out ultimate knowledge by conquering the world's uncharted regions. Indeed, Walton claims Frankenstein as his soul mate, and the scientist acts out the monster's role of deviant self, the other half, as he tempts Walton to continue his ill-fated voyage to the Pole. What distinguishes Walton from his counterpart, however, is his nascent sense of responsibility to his larger family aboard ship. In worrying about the difficulties of the voyage, he realizes he will need to be responsive to his men's fears; he "must raise the spirits of others" as well as sustain his own (p. 17). His description of his two favorite subordinates reflects the weaknesses they share with the novel's major characters: the lieutenant is "madly desirous of glory," and the ship's master has experienced a "youth passed in solitude" which by
now we recognize to be a clear danger. Walton will, however, in fulfilling his "moral responsibility to the family," steer them clear of danger.

His sailors instinctively assume the protectorship of their captain; they approach him as a surrogate parent who will not fail them. They tell Frankenstein, "Here is our captain, and he will not allow you to perish in the open sea" (p. 24). Indeed, even as Walton carefully absorbs Frankenstein's story—a story that will help vicariously to redeem the captain's solipsistic quest—he ministers to the sick man. Although in a literal sense not true, Frankenstein's acclamation to Walton that "you have restored me to life" suggests the strange interchange whereby Walton fulfills properly Frankenstein's quest for knowledge as well as assuming a paternal role toward the progeny of that quest. In spite of his horror at the "appalling hideousness" of Frankenstein's creature, Walton takes the redemptive step that no one else in society has been willing to take, and, magically, calls on him to stay (p. 219, emphasis mine). The monster is transfixed; he looks on with wonder at the person who will finally acknowledge his outstretched hand.

Walton's voyage of discovery ends, then, in his assuming responsibilities of the mature adult, the man who turns back to society away from goals benefiting only the self, toward the goal of communion with others. He forswears his self-pity at having been a neglected child, a parentless boy, and takes on fully the role of parent himself—to the monster (he listens), and to his men (he turns back). As J. M. Hill remarks: "He chooses human connections."24 In Walton, Mary Shelley has suggested the possibility of a successful, if subdued, modern Prometheus, stripped, through the expiations of Frankenstein and his monster, of Satanic aspirations. It is, perhaps, a domesticated Promethean vision that lacks the poetic grandeur of her spouse's ideal, but the novelist managed an understanding of basic human needs and limitations that, finally, may suggest less of a "dream story" than she modestly claimed as the basis for her novel.

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NOTES

1 U. C. Knoepflmacher, "Thoughts on the Aggression of Daughters," in The Endurance of Frankenstein, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepflmacher (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), pp. 88-119, offers the most extensive treatment of the biographical soundings. See also Kate Ellis, "Monsters in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois Family" and Ellen Moers, "Female Gothic" in the same volume.

3 As is by now well known, Shelley had much to exorcise from her own family relationships. Her mother had died soon after childbirth. Her father, according to Christopher Small, “regarded infants as mere parcels, to be handed from one person to another without adverse effect” (Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* [Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1972], p. 70). And we can easily associate the solipsistic Victor, whose sense of responsibility toward his creation is severely limited, with the Shelley who will, as Mary acknowledges, appreciate his child most “when he has a nursery to himself and only comes to you, just dressed and in good humor” (Frederick L. Jones, ed. *Mary Shelley’s Journal* [Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1947], p. 205; the entry occurs on 21 Oct. 1838).

4 Ellis in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, p. 136.


6 Small, p. 73.


9 Moers, in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, p. 81.

10 Ellis, in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, p. 142.


12 Knopflmacher discusses Shelley’s relationship with her father, p. 113.


14 Whether, as Bruno Bettelheim shows, the “wolf” is embodied in the mean witch or the nasty stepmother—or, we might add, the ugly monster—is irrelevant.

15 A close reading of Mary Shelley’s letters, with their two-edged sentiments, will illumine the nature of those she creates for Walton. Anticipating the arrival of Shelley’s children by Harriet, Mary exclaims: “I long [for those children] whom I love so tenderly, then there will be a sweet brother and sister for my William who will lose his pre-eminence as eldest and be helped third at table . . .” (Frederick L. Jones, ed., *The Letters of Mary W. Shelley* [Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1944], p. 16). Or again: “[And did my love] think about our home, our babe and his poor Peckie? But I’m sure you did . . .” (*Letters*, p. 14). Nothing straightforward here.


17 Knopflmacher, p. 100.

19 Bettelheim, p. 47.


21 Knoepflmacher, p. 103.

22 Dussinger, p. 49, quoting from Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

23 Bloom, p. 125.

24 Hill, p. 335.