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## "Generous and Self-Devoted Being": Grief Psychology and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

Madison Hogg  
*University Of Alabama At Birmingham*

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"GENEROUS AND SELF-DEVOTED BEING": GRIEF PSYCHOLOGY AND MARY  
SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN

by

MADISON HOGG

KYLE GRIMES, COMMITTEE CHAIR  
GALE TEMPLE  
SAMANTHA WEBB

A THESIS

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"GENEROUS AND SELF-DEVOTED BEING": GRIEF PSYCHOLOGY AND MARY  
SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN

MADISON HOGG

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

Scholarly discussion of the character Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* generally determines his fatal flaw to be an overly ambitious nature, determining a denouncement of ambition as the novel's core moral aim. However, Frankenstein's experience of and avoidance of grief shapes his actions. Exploring how modern understandings from the field of grief psychology reflect Shelley's description of Frankenstein's inner life and experiences, the novel can be treated as a metaphor for grief and grieving. A grief-informed reading of the novel brings many of the novel's main themes—connection versus isolation, belonging, and empathy—into sharper relief than ambition-focused readings, casting more potent and emotionally affective light over the entirety of the story.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ARTICLE.....	1
CONFERENCE PAPER.....	32
JOURNALS AND CONFERENCES.....	43
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	44

“GENEROUS AND SELF-DEVOTED BEING”: GRIEF PSYCHOLOGY AND MARY  
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"And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words, which found no true echo in my heart. Its several pages speak of many a walk, many a drive, and many a conversation, when I was not alone; and my companion was one who, in this world, I shall never see more. But this is for myself; my readers have nothing to do with these associations."

— Mary Shelley's Introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*

If I were to stand in front of a class of high school students who had just read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and ask them what they believe the central theme of the novel is, I am certain the conversation would quickly turn to Victor Frankenstein and his unchecked, egoistic ambition. I would surely also receive a colorful variety of condemnations, judgements, and criticisms upon his morals. Many critics and scholars would agree, as Victor is routinely vilified for the recklessness, selfishness, and above all, his ambition throughout the novel. Blind ambition is generally regarded as his primary sin and the novel's intended moral takeaway. However, in her introduction to the 1831 edition of her novel, Mary Shelley reveals a different understanding of the novel's central themes. What began as a simple horror story to pass the time and chill the blood has become, in her mind, a story about the nature of death and the process of grief. Beneath

the surface, beyond the insistence of the protagonist, Shelley's novel beautifully expresses the dangers of grief unchecked, unexpressed, and unhealed. Victor wades through a childhood of isolation and into an adulthood of the same, launched into obsession by the death of his mother. His work to create his creature is prompted by the impulse to avoid his feelings and his rejection of the creature is further avoidance of the reality of death and decay that the creature now represents. Time and time again, Victor is offered the chance to confront his grief, and time and time again he refuses, leading to the novel's somber end. Shelley did not have the benefit of 21st-century psychology when writing the novel, but she was no stranger to loss. In fact, a reading of the novel in the context of modern grief psychology reveals a poignantly felt understanding of psycho-social costs of unexpressed grief.

Several prominent studies have examined the psychological motivation for Frankenstein's creation of the monster, many of which intersect aspects of grief psychology—for example, ideas of narcissism, invisibility/isolation, and rage<sup>1</sup>—but few consider the role of grief specifically. One work that does is Matthew C. Brennan's article "The Landscape of Grief in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." In his piece, Brennan contends that Shelley's experience with grief is the driving force behind the novel and that her grief is communicated through Victor's character. He also argues for the creature as a creation born of Victor's grief (33), though his focus is less on the specific implications of this reading and more on the ways in which each character's changing opinions of and experiences with nature are used to express the theme of grief. Like Brennan, I believe that grief is the main motivator behind Victor's actions. Further, by closely reading the novel and supporting such a reading with modern grief psychology, greater insight can be

gained into what Shelley has to say about grief and grieving through the characters of Victor and his creature. Victor's narcissism, isolation, and rage all contribute to and complicate his expression of the griefs he has endured.

Though the study of grief is as old as psychology itself, only recently has the field begun to characterize grief that steps beyond normal bounds. First, it will be helpful to dispense with the five-stage theory of grief, which is ubiquitous in popular psychology and popular culture. The five-stage theory is no longer accepted as psychological fact, as there is insufficient empirical evidence for its accuracy and little practical utility in its use, as it can establish unrealistic expectations about the progress of grief for both practitioners and bereaved people (Stroebe et al. 467-468). Instead, the field has moved toward a more nuanced system of categorizing and defining grief, one that allows for individual variance and does not uphold a certain grieving process as the standard. The present study will focus less on "normal" grief and more on grief that could be considered clinically abnormal. Abnormal grieving is usually called either "complicated" or "prolonged" grief.

At the time of writing, prolonged grief disorder (PGD) is among the most recent disorders added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V Text Revision (DSM-V-TR), which is, according to the American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology, used as the field standard for the diagnosis and classification of mental illnesses ("DSM-V"). PGD is indicated when the bereaved exhibits symptoms associated with grieving for a longer time or to a greater degree than the average.<sup>2</sup> Often, severe symptoms present for longer than 6 months are required for this diagnosis. Notable symptoms include identity disruption (feeling as though oneself or part of

oneself died with the deceased), avoidance of reminders of the loss, intense emotional pain (anger, bitterness, sorrow), difficulty resuming usual activity after a loss, and experiencing a sense of meaninglessness or intense loneliness (American Psychological Association 325). The distinction between normal and abnormal grieving is, of course, bound by the cultural and social norms in which a person is situated.

A focused examination of *Frankenstein* reveals that the DSM criteria for PGD often align with aspects of Victor Frankenstein's character. As previously stated, humans have been grieving and observing grief for as long as there have been human communities. I believe that, by using what science currently reveals to us about complicated and prolonged grief, a better understanding of Victor Frankenstein's life, experiences, and responses can be reached. PGD is a touchstone that I will return to throughout my discussion of the novel as Shelley explores the human experience of grieving.

A person's readiness to confront any sort of psychological stress is partly determined by their background, and Victor Frankenstein is no different. Frankenstein's childhood has long been a point of debate among scholars, with many critics sharing the opinion that, despite Victor's own account, it was less than ideal. Victor insists upon the Elysian nature of his rearing, saying, "...it may be imagined that while every hour of my infant life I received a lesson of patience, of charity, and of self-control, I was so guided by a silken cord that all seemed but one train of enjoyment to me" (33).<sup>3</sup> Despite his gushing approbations of his youth, note the "imagined" in this passage. He does not say it was truly joy and bliss, but that it could be imagined to be so. Others have likewise argued that Victor was too eager in his glowing descriptions and fervent assertions. Laura



P. Claridge, for example contends that Victor's "continual exaggerations of familial love... reveals to us the inadequacy of the homelife that belies his oft-fevered protestations of attachment" (15), and further, that his unblemished memories are a psychological defense mechanism, protecting him from the realities of his childhood. Peering further into the text, she argues that Victor is objectified by his parents, being described as "their plaything and their idol" (Shelley 33). Further, she insists that, of all the virtues Victor lists as instilled in him by his parents (patience, charity, and self-control), he displays none of these qualities in his adult life (15). When viewed from this angle, Victor's childhood parallels the early days of the biblical Adam: the beloved creation of well-intentioned higher powers in whose community and equality he cannot share, alive in a world of perfection, but completely lacking companionship. Such a lifelong loneliness would doubtless create an unsteady frame for Victor's view of himself, his emotions, and his experiences. His emotional isolation is expressed in his childhood relationship with Elizabeth, which Victor recounts solely in terms of possession, saying, "I...looked upon Elizabeth as mine—mine to protect, to love, and cherish. All praises bestowed on her, I received as made to a possession of my own" (36) and asserts that "until death, she was to be mine only" (36). To Victor, the people in his life are possessions to use, to have, or to lose. They, like him, have no agency of their own. Such a view informs how he will grieve the loss of such a possession and his mindset in creating another.

Regarding the hedging apparent in Victor's description of his childhood, another relevant point arises: it is a mistake to take Victor at his word. In telling his story to Walton, Victor has a specific desired moral outcome in mind: the demonization of

ambition, while still protecting his own person from any real censure or judgement. These desires shape his retelling, requiring the reader to keep his aims in mind. Though he does not appear to lie outrightly, he displays so little self-awareness and awareness of others that his recollections must always be suspect. Lee Zimmerman argues that the root of Victor's problem with perception is his own invisibility: his inability to be truly seen by those around him, and his inability to truly see others. Zimmerman claims, "Victor experiences the self he presents to others as largely fraudulent" (146), which is mainly caused by his parents' misconceptions of his identity during childhood. Zimmerman encourages the reader to look past Victor's insistence that his childhood was perfect, and posits that Shelley wishes us to see the loneliness, despair, and suffering that lies beneath. Victor seems to have a dim awareness of the fact that his parents have wronged him, describing himself as "their child...whose future lot it was in their hands to direct to happiness or to misery, according as they fulfilled their duties to me" (33-34). If he is miserable, his parents must have somehow directed him towards that future: somehow, they must have failed in their responsibilities. Even as Victor obliquely acknowledges their role in his suffering, he refuses to truly see the reality of his situation, choosing instead to ascribe all things to fate, unable to honestly appraise his childhood and the pain his past has caused.

A worldview defined by the objectification of others and created by the objectification of the self has a number possible outcomes, but perhaps the most likely is a crushing sense of isolation. Frankenstein is, in his estimation, an object among objects, entirely unseen by those around him: alone in the dark. Zimmerman writes, "In some sense, *Frankenstein* takes as its central subject the longing to be truly seen, as well as the

despair about whether such recognition is possible"(142). Despair is an important keyword in the present discussion of this novel, given its close connection to the ideas of grief and grieving. Zimmerman also posits that Victor's fury at his own invisibility "remains hidden and inexpressible, and is ultimately disowned by being projected into the monster" (146). Invisibility, rage, and despair all come together to create the Victor Frankenstein who narrates his life history to Walton. Zimmerman's observations, if fully understood and applied, should lead to a discussion about grief and grieving. Instead of looking solely at Victor's rage, his despair too must be addressed. Victor is ultimately grieved by his invisibility and objectification and, because of his ineptitude at dealing with emotional turmoil, this grief manifests in his more-evident rage and hubris.

When it comes to one's familiarity with and ability to grieve, understanding the background from which the person comes is paramount. Though some consider grief to be a natural reaction to a situation, other theorists have considered the ways in which grief responses are learned in childhood. Concerning this response theory of grieving, professor of psychology Svend Brinkmann writes, "emotions like grief are not just mechanical reactions, but... ways in which humans try to understand significant situations in their lives through participating in the social practices of their cultures" (470). Victor discloses little about his experience of grief and grieving as a child, and, though he is in his late adolescence when he loses his mother, he is clearly still emotionally immature and in the process of developing. When thrust into an unfamiliar situation with the loss of his mother, he looks to those around him in hopes of understanding how he should respond. An examination of the Frankenstein family's response to Caroline's death

reveals what Victor has learned about how to cope with and undertake the process of grieving.

Victor introduces the story of his mother's death as "the first misfortune of [his] life" (42) and "an omen... of [his] future misery" (42). As previously established, this protestation is likely somewhat erroneous, as no one makes it out of childhood entirely unscathed by disappointment, misfortune, and loss—especially not Victor Frankenstein. However, in this statement, he accurately pinpoints the connection between the death of his mother and the life he will lead, though he does not ascribe causality to the relationship. He instead sees it as a foreshadowing of the life he is fated to lead. The account begins with Elizabeth's sickness and his mother's devotion to her, refusing to quarantine her adopted daughter and leave her without familial care. It is due his mother's ministrations that Elizabeth's recovery is credited, as Victor says, "her watchful attentions triumphed over the malignity of the distemper—Elizabeth was saved, but the consequences of this imprudence were fatal to her preserver" (42). On her deathbed, Caroline Frankenstein is as picturesque and perfect as she was in her life. She rues that she must leave behind a life where she is "so happy and beloved" (43). Before she dies, she lays on Victor and Elizabeth a heavy charge: to fulfill the hope of her life and be the consolation of Alphonse through their marriage, with Elizabeth seamlessly assuming the role Caroline must now abandon (43). Victor records no specific response to this charge, his silence leaving space where a reader would expect to encounter an emotional response.

Continuing the theme of silence, Victor carefully avoids deeply describing the aftermath of his mother's passing. Victor stresses not that he is unable to describe the

experience of grief, but that he "need not" (43) do so. Death is to him "the most irreparable evil" (43) characterized by the recognition of a new, dark, reality lurking in the benignity of the present world and the despairing looks he observes on the face of the bereaved. Victor's only apparent genuine, introspective claim is phrased in an objective third-person: "It is so long before the mind can persuade itself that she, whom we saw every day, and whose very existence appeared a part of our own, can have departed for ever" (43). He struggles to reconcile the reality of his loss and to live in the new absence this loss has created. The peculiar phrase "whose very existence appeared a part of our own" is a further indication of the unhealthy family dynamics the reader has already observed among the Frankensteins. In psychological literature, this subsuming of identity, this entangling, is referred to as "enmeshment". In an enmeshed family, members are overly involved in one another's personal lives, making any differentiation of the self or exercise of autonomy difficult, leaving each constituent identity unstable without the others ("enmeshment"). In an enmeshed family, grief becomes a particularly dangerous process. Victor has lost not only his mother, but a part of himself. He once possessed her and she once possessed him, but now, no longer. He cannot lean on his family for real support, either, as they all have lost a part of themselves, leaving them all incomplete and inadequate to reconcile with their loss. After this bit of self-disclosure, Victor hastens to distance himself from having done so. He ascribes generality to these ideas by applying them broadly as "the reflections of the first days" (43) after a loss. Not his reflections, but "the" reflections. In lieu of giving more details about his experience with grief, he turns to his audience, saying, "Yet from whom has not that rude hand rent away some dear connection? and why should I describe a sorrow which all have felt, and

must feel?" (43). In a masterful move of deflection and distancing, Victor refuses any further rumination on his own experience with generalization; a platitude designed as a shield for any further expression of grief he might offer.

Victor's description of his mother's death also reflects another finding resulting from the study of complicated grief: the idea of identity confusion. Identity confusion is defined as "a sense that a part of oneself has died with decedent" (Bellet 397), which is nearly word-for-word the situation Victor describes. This definition intersects with discussions of enmeshment and unstable identities but goes even further in its implications. One study in particular among bereaved adults with complicated grief found that identity confusion may result from "diminished self-complexity" (Bellet et al. 404). Self-complexity is defined as "the number of separate, unrelated aspects of the self-concept" ("self-complexity"). A greater self-complexity can encourage less reactivity when aspects of a person's identity are either threatened or validated, while a low self-complexity leads to a much more volatile sense of identity. Thus, if Victor has a fragile sense of identity through diminished self-complexity, it is very likely that he will have a much more difficult time adapting to loss in one of those areas of self-concept. To this point, all that has been revealed about Victor is his identity as Alphonse and Caroline's doted-upon son, Elizabeth's brother/lover, Clerval's friend, and an aspiring scholar. His sense of self is, evidently, not very complex. A loss so central to his identity will rattle Victor to the core of his being and complicate his ability to recover. His statements regarding his own emotions are likewise revealing regarding his self-fluency, or his ability to understand and express aspects of his self, with low self-fluency is also noted among those with complicated or prolonged grief (Bellet et al. 404). Through the loss of

his mother, Victor's very identity is shattered, largely due to his inability to establish an identity outside of his family.

Another point of pressure on young Victor is the constant, looming presence of his father. Before being shipped off to Ingolstadt for school, he ends his account of grief by expressing the necessity of moving on after a loss, saying:

The time at length arrives, when grief is rather an indulgence than a necessity... my mother was dead, but we still had duties which we ought to perform; we must continue our course with the rest, and learn to think ourselves fortunate, whilst one remains that the spoiler has not seized. (43)

His actions, however, betray these resolute words, revealing his reluctance to leave his home. He says, "my departure for Ingolstadt... was now again determined upon... it appeared to me sacrilege to so soon leave... the house of mourning, and to rush into the thick of life" (43-44). Note especially the passive language as he speaks of his departure: it was determined upon, and, it seems, not by him. He obtained his leave from his father and seems helpless against his father's insistence that life proceed as normal. Alphonse Frankenstein appears as an unsympathetic, smothering, shadowed figure in the background of Victor's grief, disregarding his son's desires in favor of his own. This pattern is consistently displayed throughout Victor's childhood. Alphonse's lack of emotional fluency is clear, as Victor bitterly recounts Alphonse's casual disregard for his son's newfound passion for learning the secrets of the world (39). Victor draws a line from this disregard to the tragic path his life will lead, lamenting that his father had not taken the time to explain his reasoning behind his reaction (39). If he had, Victor muses that he might never "have received the fatal impulse that led to [his] ruin" (39), obliquely

placing the blame for his actions on his father. Victor continues in his course of study, but never forgets the sting of Alphonse's disapproval. Throughout the text and especially prominent in his response to grief, Victor's thoughts are a confused hash of his own and his father's, which further establishes Victor as a man possessing a fragile identity. His other model in grieving is Elizabeth, who hides her grief and, as promised, subsumes herself into the role Caroline left vacant. Victor assumes that "she forgot even her own regret in her endeavors to make us forget" (44). He takes Elizabeth's composure and responsibility at face value without ever interrogating what may lie behind the appearance, as he is inclined to do. Through the pressure from his father and the example set by Elizabeth, Victor's enmeshed and vulnerable sense of self leaves him unable to directly confront his grief which he instead buries underneath the appearance of normal life. However, grief buried unhealed does not vanish, but rather festers.

Victor's ultimate choice regarding how to avoid his grief is to throw himself into his work. Avoidance is a common practice among those who have experienced a loss and is often used to regulate distressing emotions (Baker et al. 2016). Avoidance is, according to Baker et al., "an integral component of the initial, acute grief response" (534). However, an over-reliance on avoiding emotions, thoughts, and behaviors associated with the deceased can allow acute feelings of grief to persist for abnormal periods of time and contribute to the development of complicated grief (534). Baker et. al's study additionally found that avoidance-based coping strategies may be more prevalent in younger adults (543) and that avoidance was highest when the loss was caused by a short illness (543), both of which fit Victor's situation. Further, a study by Lipp and O'Brein found that college students who engaged in avoidant coping strategies were more likely to



experience complicated or prolonged grief (193). Avoidance, when over-practiced, does not allow the loss to become a reality of the bereaved's life, causing more emotional and cognitive issues than it alleviates.

However, Victor is not able to entirely avoid the feelings he refuses to engage with, as the distant awareness of his family's strife haunts him as he pursues his gruesome ends. The initial inspiration to create his monster occurs exactly when Victor begins to consider returning home after two years away (51). While working toward the monster's creation, he guiltily remembers his father's injunction that correspondence with his family ought to be his first priority (55), but he justifies his refusal to correspond by explaining that he, "wished, as it were, to procrastinate all that related to [his] feelings of affection until the great object which swallowed up every habit of [his] nature, should be completed" (55). In other words, despite the obligations that weigh often on his mind, he elects to avoid every emotional aspect of his life and pour all of his energy and attention into the creature's creation. The work shoves his emotional life out of his mind, allowing him to disregard and ignore it. Nowhere in the text do we see Victor attempt to confront the reality of his loss. Instead, his unhealed grief is exacerbated by the emotional weight of familial obligations and channeled into his work as he practices avoidance of despair through his obsessive act of creation.

Regarding his obsession, Victor portrays his drive to create in a decidedly negative light but stops short of identifying grief as the cause. When he at last discovers the secret of restoring life to corpses, he describes himself as akin to "the Arabian who had been buried with the dead and found a passage to life" (53), once again alluding to the reality of death that haunts him and his desire to escape it. Though there are moments

of inexpressible, transcendent passion during his work, he overall deems the pursuit as deleterious, as he “seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit” (54). Victor further stresses the ghastliness of his situation, saying, “...my enthusiasm was checked by my anxiety, and I appeared rather like one doomed by slavery to toil in the mines, or any other unwholesome trade, than an artist occupied by his favorite employment” (56). These actions do not reveal the mental balance that Victor professes to admire so much, and it is to this imbalance that Victor credits his fault. He instructs Walton on this point, saying, “A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never allow a passion or transitory desire to disturb his tranquility” (55-56). In his mind, the perfect state for a human is one that experiences neither the heights nor the depths of emotion: no overwhelming happiness, no crushing grief, no overwhelming ambition, no exuberant joy. He desperately desires to keep his turbulent feelings inside, to never show an unsettled nature. However he might protest, though, his grief unsettles him. Instead of acknowledging the existence of such overwhelming and uncomfortable feelings, he substitutes manic, addictive, obsessive work. The core cause of this frenzy is not ambition as he so ardently insists, but instead the unhealed grief he carries. Ambition is a misdiagnosis of Victor's problem and naught but a mask for the true war Victor is waging: a war against the reality of death and decay—a war motivated not by altruistic aims of curing all disease but instead by his own unexpressed grief.

Like the nature of his obsession, Victor seems equally unaware of his true goals in creating his creature. As the time of the creature’s enlivening draws nearer, Victor speculates on what he hopes the end result of his experimentation to be, saying, “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” (54). His main desire is gratitude and love from his creations, and to be adored by them as the father of their species, perhaps to receive from them the sort of affection he did not receive from his own early life. However, another thought seems to emerge in Victor's mind as he goes about his gruesome work: he might even “renew life where death has apparently devoted the body to corruption” (54).

Though this mention could be read as an afterthought, the reader must remember Victor's nature as an unreliable narrator, often unsure of his own motivations. If it was his wish to create an entirely new species, why did he attempt to give new life to the human form? Why was the creature made in the image of man, instead of a homunculus? Victor offers a shallow justification for his choice, saying that his "imagination was too much exalted by [his] first success to permit [him] to doubt his ability to give life to an animal as wonderful and complex as man" (53). He, again, credits this choice to ambition and pride, refusing to deal with any of the underlying issues of his childhood, his mother's death, and his present situation. However, I argue that his goal in adulthood was always to restore life to human beings, maturing and shifting from his childhood desire to master nature through the "banish[ing of] disease from the human frame" (40). Victor's refusal to acknowledge or recognize this is—considering his character—unsurprising. The driving force behind this project is not just the ambition and pride of an ego unchecked, but blind grief. He desires power over the natural world so that he will never again be hurt by its decay. He desires the power over his newly created race as a way to vindicate the lonely, powerless, invisible child inside. He aims to overcome death so that grief may no longer

afflict him. However, these goals are too deep and too terrible for him to acknowledge, so he continues to deceive himself.

With this view of Frankenstein's motivations, the question of the creature as a character comes into consideration. The first thing Victor notices after the creature's awakening is its yellow eye opening in the dim lamplight (57), bringing to mind the themes of invisibility and seeing that Zimmerman discusses. Victor is immediately seen and known by his creature and cannot bear it. His instinctive response to seen-ness is revulsion. He then beholds its breathing, confirming that he has truly restored life to the human frame. When it comes to expressing his emotions in this moment, Victor once again elects not to do so. He bemoans, "How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavored to form? His limbs were in proper proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! —Great God!" (57). Victor finds himself completely horrified the moment he recognizes that the creature he so carefully formed is indeed capable of life: the very thing he created it for. The narrative races to shift focus away from that moment, instead recounting Frankenstein's dreams afterward: a dream of Elizabeth dying in his arms and taking the form of his dead mother (58-59). Even if Victor refuses to acknowledge the role that his fear of death plays in his work, his subconscious attests to the truth. When he awakens to see the creature attempting communication with him, his horror at being seen by his progeny returns:

Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were

rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived. (58)

The horror of his creation does not fully set in until he sees it look, breathe, move, and speak like a human, forcing him to acknowledge that what he has created is, in fact, human. In an article concerning the horror felt at the reveal of the creature's physical ugliness, Denise Gigante writes, "... the Creature appears as a return of what is universally repressed... the horror at the core of all existence" (567). Through him, Victor sees "the raw, unaestheticized stuff of humanity" (568). It is the creature's humanity that horrifies Victor so: the way in which the creature perfectly reflects what it is to be human and possess a human body. Here stands his Adam, made in the image of Victor as Adam was made in the image of God. Victor's only begotten son, who was supposed to be a symbol of life, is now the image of death, decay, rot, and loss: a mockery of the assumed sacredness of existence. Even his mother—even Elizabeth—is nothing more than these pieces, animated with "a spark of being" (Shelley 57). Victor has not overcome death, but instead revealed the true nature of life and compounded grief upon grief. Now, he has created a reminder of the horror he has spent the last few years of his life fleeing. The creature conceived in obsession and grief now breathes, and every beat of its stolen heart is a reminder of Frankenstein's powerlessness against his own mortality.

The creature, while being an image of humanity at its ugly core, is also a double of Victor. He creates a body for the grieving, emotional self he disowns and, by giving it life, is forced to confront everything in him he could not contain or acknowledge. In Otto Rank's observations concerning the figure of the double throughout literature, he notes a

number of commonalities that can be said to apply to Frankenstein. Often, the one who creates or possess the double has a neurotic and melancholic temperament and the double often stands as an image for the character's fear of death (79). The double also allows the protagonist to disown certain qualities or actions, crediting them instead to his double, created by a literal or metaphorical "diabolical pact" (76). This description fits neatly with the nature of Victor and his creature, as the creature is created to bear the grief that Frankenstein cannot, and then causes further griefs that, one could argue, originate in Frankenstein's own actions. The creature becomes an image of the consequences of grief unchecked. George Levine likewise views the creature as a metaphorical manifestation of the divided self, the monstrous and distasteful existing alongside the virtuous and good ("The Ambiguous Heritage..." 15). The impact of the creature as Frankenstein's double will be further explored as the novel's events play out.

If the creature is Victor's double, then both his identity and his experiences are closely tied to Frankenstein's. What does the creature—a splinter of Frankenstein and a manifestation of his grief—do? The creature's first concern is meeting and managing his bodily needs, just as a human would. His next desire is companionship, which is denied to him by the first old man he meets (105) and the first village he enters, from which he is chased by stones and other projectiles (106). As he watches the DeLaceys, he gradually becomes more and more aware of his loneliness and isolation from society. This isolation mirrors Victor's own: an innocent victim who, for whatever reason, cannot properly share in communion with those around him. In Victor's case, it was caused by the nature of his parent's attentions, and in the creature's, due to the monstrous body bestowed on him by his parent. For a time, the creature is content to watch the DeLacey's from afar and bask

in the warmth of their relationships from a distance, though this quickly proves to be too little to satisfy him. His rejection by the DeLaceys ultimately leads to the creature's rage and to the killing of William. His emotions drive every action he undertakes. Emotion leads him to save the drowning girl, and emotions lead him in rage back toward the land of his father. In a similar flurry of emotion, he kills William, attempting to silence the epithets thrown at him by the child (143). When William finally lies dead, the creature does not rejoice in the act of killing, but instead in his ability to "create desolation" (143), a desolation that literalizes both the grief he represents and the grief he bears. In the slaying of William, the creature begins his destruction of Victor's most intimate relationships. He rages against Victor's family in a way that Victor cannot, giving vent to the destructive impulses that Victor could not contain in himself.

When discussing Victor's relationship with his creature, the somewhat strange incident of Justine's trial is also worth considering. After killing William, the creature uses an image of Victor's mother to pin his crime on an innocent victim, one who is also close to Victor's heart. After determining at a glance that the creature murdered William (76), Victor waffles heavily between taking the guilt upon himself and disowning the guilt entirely by placing it upon his creature. He spends the night out in elements, much as the creature spent his early life, all the while thinking about the creature. He says, "I considered the being... 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" (77). Victor imagines the creature as a part of him, as the very spirit of his own being, the dead part of him housed in the grave—or, perhaps, his mother's grave. His use of the word "forced" is also remarkable in this context: though he continually ascribes violence and ill intention to his

creature, here he seems to imagine the animating spirit inside his creature as belonging to himself, compelling the creature to commit violence against Victor's family. As Justine's trial proceeds, he cannot seem to separate himself from that which he has brought into the world, seeming to acknowledge that the creature's existence is not only caused by him but is also a part of him. Victor even entertains the idea of confessing to the murder himself (81), but ultimately refuses to do so, excusing himself from the duty by determining that he would be counted as mad (81). George Levine writes, "As Frankenstein's creation, the monster can be taken as an expression of an aspect of Frankenstein's self... leading an apparently independent organic life of its own and and yet irremediably and subtly tied to its creator, re-enacting in mildly disguised ways, his creator's feelings and experiences" ("... Tradition of Realism" 18-19). Victor seems to be dimly aware of this relationship and of his responsibility for not only the creature's existence but also the creature's actions, the awareness surfacing into moments of clarity regarding what he has truly brought into the world. He cannot disown this part of himself, nor can he fully accept it.

Relevant to Victor's relationship with the creature is Zimmerman's discussion of invisibility and seenness in the novel, literalizing the Victor's struggle with invisibility through his and the creature's experiences. Another term Zimmerman employs for the state of seenness is recognition (142), moving in a more metaphorical direction by equating seenness with being understood, accepted, and known. Zimmerman picks up on this theme with the final question of his article when, observing the bleakness that typifies the novel's progression, he asks, whether the central concern of the novel is "nameless dread or the dread of being named?" (155) Indeed, there is both an ardent desire to be seen and known present in the novel, but also a soul-deep fear of it. If Victor



were able to name the creature, to own it as his progeny and a part of him, there would be hope for himself, Justine, and all the duo's future victims. Victor, however, continually refuses to do so, despite having ample opportunities both during Justine's trial and afterward.

The creature's plea to Victor for a wife is his last chance to receive the connection and recognition that will cure his grief: if a family will not see him, perhaps a wife will. Throughout the novel, the creature sees the love of a woman as the ultimate balm to a suffering soul. The creature learns this lesson by watching the grief of the DeLacey's over their loss of fortune and the way in which it is lessened by Safie's presence. The creature also knows the story of Adam, and how even in exile, he was given a wife to care for him. Shelley echoes this concept in the life of Victor through the character of Elizabeth. Her affection and presence are a comfort to the entire Frankenstein family as they battle through both unimaginable losses and the smaller sorrows of everyday living. As the creature learns about "the difference of the sexes" (121), he becomes convinced that only a wife would truly be able to see him and ease his grief. These lessons, in particular, prompt his despair over his situation, lacking family or the memory of a family, leaving him entirely confused as to his identity (121). He argues that a wife will provide "the interchange of those sympathies necessary to [his] being" (142), as Safie did for Felix, Eve did for Adam, and Elizabeth does for Victor. He sees in this interchange the solution to his isolation, seeking more than Victor's worldview as an object among objects, hoping instead to exist as someone who can interact with and connect to those around him.

In grief psychology, much research has been done regarding grief and the way in which positive social relations can mitigate feelings of grief and help individuals achieve

positive emotional outcomes following loss. In a study concerning social support among those bereaved by suicide, researchers found that high levels of social support among the bereaved were associated with lower level of depression (Spino et al. 605), while another study concerning bereaved college students found that family support was "positively predictive of post-traumatic growth" (Lipp and O'Brien 196). These studies display concrete evidence of what humans have known for a very long time: it is far harder to endure anything difficult alone. Communities rally around those who grieve, sharing memories, buying flowers, and bringing meals. An "interchange of sympathies" (Shelley 142) is often a necessary step in achieving not only recovery from the acute phases of grief but also growing after a loss. The creature sees clearly the path to recovery and wholeness that Victor refuses or is unable to acknowledge.

According to the creature, a loving and empathetic relationship would cure him of not only his grief, but his evil. The creature argues, "My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal" (131). He stresses the loneliness and solitude of his environment, likely striking a chord with his deeply lonely creator. Further, he laments, "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous" (89). In his estimation, his vices come, not from anything innate, but from the grief he has experienced in his life, sharing Victor's tendency to deny responsibility for his actions, though the creature is arguably the one for whom this excuse actually works. Victor is forced to confront his own loneliness and invisibility as his other self comes to him, crying out for a communion of equals, a communion that Victor himself has never known and has, on some level, always desired. He expresses these ideas to Victor in hopes that

his father-creator will understand and hear an echo of his own suffering in the story of his creature. For a moment, he does. Victor muses, "His words had a strange effect upon me. I compassioned him, and sometimes felt a wish to console him; but when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened, and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred" (147). Upon hearing the creature's words, Victor struggles to reject his plea. He feels a pull toward him, a drive to remedy his suffering. However, when his physical eye lands on the creature, he is suddenly reminded of all that his progeny represents. He is reminded of death, of dying, and of all that he has disowned and discarded. In this exchange, Victor has a chance to acknowledge the truth of what he sees standing before him: the reality of death and grief. He has the chance to extend empathy and to treat his creature as not an object but a living soul, and in doing so, confront the grief that has stalked him for years.

In creating a partner for the creature, Victor begins to undertake the horrifying work of grief and to truly reckon with death of his mother. His father's resumed urging of the necessity of his marriage to Elizabeth further distresses him, the very idea filling him with "horror and dismay" (151). He credits this feeling to his unfulfilled obligation to his creature, but the intermixing of the creature with Elizabeth and his mother likely complicates his motivations. Regarding his obligation to create for the creature a wife, he asks, "Could I enter into a festival with this deadly weight yet hanging around my neck and bowing me to the ground?"(152) Once again, his words echo with double meaning: he feels the weight of the promise he made, but also the greater weight of grief and mortality. Elizabeth, his love, is made of the same physical stuff as the wife he will form for the creature. His mother is of the same substance; he is of the same substance. He has

a chance to deal with the loss of his mother and the mortality of those around him. However, he is clearly unwilling. Even as he works, he refuses to truly engage with his task, continuing to fantasize about the easy way out, where the creature is simply killed by an accident (152).

Victor's justification for the destruction of the creature's wife is the irredeemability of his creature's evil nature, but a closer reading reveals his habit of self-deception at work. At first, Victor acknowledges the original goodness of his creation, until his terror and selfishness cloud his thoughts and he stubbornly refuses to accept the creature's appraisal of their respective situations. As he works, he falls into an aggressive sort of apathy. When recounting the creature's threats to harm him, he determines that no "voluntary act of [his] could avert it" (170-171), believing the creature will destroy him whether he acquiesces to his request or not. As always, he is at the whims of fate. He obliquely acknowledges his self-deception as he says, "I had resolved *in my own mind* that to create another like the fiend I had first made would be an act of the basest and most atrocious selfishness; and *I banished from my mind every thought that could lead to a different conclusion*" (171, emphasis mine). He is resigned to the fact that he will die and even that he should die, because fate has determined it for him, resulting in a near-suicidal passivity. Victor's self destructiveness parades as virtue as he fights to justify the choice that he knows is the wrong one. By rejecting the creature's plea for sympathy, Victor cements the fate that all along he has called inevitable. Because he refuses to diagnose the true nature of the sickness that afflicts both him and his progeny, he destroys the cure. The cycle of grief will continue, as Victor continues to protest that he can do nothing to stop it.

Conversely, the creature refuses to accept fate the same way Victor does. In seeking the love of his creator, human companionship, and finally a wife, he is continually attempting to improve his situation. After the destruction of the female creature, he rails against Victor's selfishness, saying, "I may die; but first you, my tyrant and tormentor, shall curse the sun that gazes on your misery" (168). Unlike Victor, he is fearless and therefore powerful to choose his path (168). He leaves his creator with a final proclamation: he will be with Victor on his wedding-night (168). Victor rages and nearly attacks the creature, but, in his own words, the creature "eluded him" (168). He then elects not to pursue the creature, having "suffered him to depart" (168) for some unexplained reason. Victor has given up, and is thus powerless against his creature. He immediately assumes, from the creature's words, that he is the one who will die on his wedding night (168-169), entirely disregarding both the creature's pre-established pattern of attacking those Victor loves while leaving Victor unharmed and the creature's promise of inflicting misery on Victor. The reader can easily infer what will occur, but Victor, blind to logic, welcomes his promised, tragic end.

Through the lens of grief's role in *Frankenstein*, the murder of Clerval takes on a special significance. The novel is a tale of doubles, foils, and multiples, where "every story seems a variation on every other" (Levine "...Tradition of Realism" 20). One of the most telling of these redoublings is the duo of Victor and Clerval. Henry Clerval shines as a better man than Frankenstein in nearly every way. Despite being as studious as Victor, his studies are grounded in the natural, experiential world and are directed towards bettering humanity and "the moral relations of things" (Shelley, 38). He functions out of an abundance of life, in contrast to Victor's constant focus on loss. In a

discussion about the significance of Clerval as a character, George Levine writes, “Clerval is, surely, Frankenstein without the monster” (19). If this is the case, and the creature is the incarnation of Victor’s grief, Clerval’s death, then, becomes a sort of suicide, as Victor’s creature—the embodiment of his grief—kills his better self. Clerval's death and the other deaths in the novel can be read as a picture of the way unhealed grief causes one to turn inward. When one grieves poorly, one becomes isolated in their pain, as the outside world becomes less real than the experienced mental anguish. Grief becomes indistinguishable from the self—the sadness a ubiquitous reality—until the self is ultimately destroyed in pursuit of the destruction of grief. The death of Clerval is proof of a point of no return for both Victor and his progeny: his grief will run rampant, remaining unhealed and unacknowledged.

True to form, Victor's letter to Elizabeth reveals his complete lack of intention to be truly open and honest with another human being, forever closing him off from the connection that might allow him to heal. He assures her in his letter that he will reveal his dreadful secret on the day after their wedding, postponing because "there must be perfect confidence between [them]" (189). This need for perfect confidence once again speaks to Victor's cowardice: he believes that the creature will kill him on his wedding night, and he will never have to disclose anything to her. If he were to share his secret, there is a chance that they would be able to destroy the creature before he fulfills his promise. Victor elects not to and thus cements the fate he already believes is inevitable. He would rather risk his own and Elizabeth's lives than experience rejection from her for his actions. His grief has separated him even from the one he claims to love best in the world.

Otto Rank, writing concerning the presence of the double in literature, considers the slaying of the double as a killing of oneself, which in turn frames Victor's ultimate quest as a suicidal one. This quest is a continuation of the life Victor has already lived; one consumed by grief and grieving, with Victor's pursuit of the creature representing a quest to destroy the emotional part of his own self. He single-mindedly pursues this end instead of pausing to consider any other path. Tellingly, his last action before beginning his hunt is to visit the graves of his family members (202), standing amidst the rubble of the life his unchecked grief has created for him. In this moment, he is equally as consumed by rage as his counterpart, praying to the night to "let the cursed and hellish monster drink deep of his agony; let him feel the despair that now torments me" (202). As he speaks, he is possessed by his fury and choked by rage. His descent into total self-hatred is complete. Even in the graveyard as he speaks, his creature is nearby, exulting in Victor's decision to continue living: "I am satisfied: miserable wretch! you have determined to live, and I am satisfied" (203). The creature's desire is for Victor, to whom he is "bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us" (99), to continue living as, despite all his pain, the creature himself wishes to live. His last hope lies in causing Victor to feel the grief that was imposed on him, the grief he was created to carry and rejected for representing. If the creature cannot hold communion with the happy and the human—if he cannot have one of his own kind—he will take communion with his miserable creator. He will find connection in sorrow and grief as the two halves of the whole are at last united in the experience of misery and the aim to destroy.

Regarding the connection between abnormal grief and suicidality, findings generally indicate that those who experience conditions such as complicated grief or PGD

are at a higher risk for suicidal thoughts and actions. According to studies of suicidal ideation<sup>4</sup>, which is defined as thinking about, planning, or imagining one's own suicide ("suicidal ideation"), PGD symptoms are positively associated with frequent suicidal thoughts (Sekowski and Prigerson 1215). An earlier 2004 study concerning complicated grief and suicidality found that those who meet the criteria for complicated grief have a "significantly heightened risk of suicidality" (Latham and Prigerson 359). Another study by Sandler et al. identified specific aspects of grief among bereaved children and adolescents and analyzed these aspects' connection to suicidality. One factor they found strongly associated with suicidality was Intrusive Grief Thoughts (Sandler et al. 1167). Participants who engaged in grief ruminations, thinking about "what life would be like if the death had not happened, the unfairness of the death, and the meaning of the death for one's life" (Sandler et al. 1167) were more likely to experience increased suicidality as their lives continued (Sandler et al. 1167). Given how closely these and other findings regarding PGD and complicated grief intersect with Victor's experiences, his suicidality can be read as a consequence of deleterious grief running unchecked through a very troubled, fragile psyche.

After many years of undertaking his suicidal quest, Victor encounters Walton. Walton is Victor's final chance to make a lasting connection, to truly and honestly account for the life he has lived and the choices he has made. However, Victor persists in misreading his own narrative and offers a simplistic and bastardized moral solution to the problem his life poses. He continually instructs Walton against hubris and all-consuming passion (55-56). He shows great interest in the preservation of his tale, even checking Walton's notes to ensure that it is not "mutilated" as it goes "down to posterity" (210). He



compares his path to that of the archangel Satan: one who reached too highly and found himself fallen eternally (211). However, he neglects to give any concrete reason for his fall. Once again, the passivity of his language is telling: "I am chained in eternal hell" (211), "I am sunk" (211), and "I fell, never, never again to rise" (211). He frames his story nearly as if he were simply too good, too bright, and too passionate, and that is what brought about his ruin, entirely eschewing any true description of motivation or aim. Victor also reveals, in his exhortations to Walton's crew, that he has learned nothing from his experience, as he urges them onward through the ice with the same ideas to which he credits the creation of his monster: to be "hailed as the benefactors of your species; your names adored" (214). Frankenstein, though, doubles back on this, later encouraging Walton to "seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition" (217). Yet again, though, he waffles, questioning himself: "Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed" (218). He stops short of fully attempting to dissuade Walton from ambition as he recognizes that simply avoiding ambition is not a realistic, functional, or satisfying conclusion. Instead, he uses his dying words to encourage others to continue down the path he walked, considering that maybe things will turn out differently for them, refusing to remember his misery for what it was. His blindness is complete as he dies without ever confronting the truth of his situation, having successfully avoided truly seeing or being seen by all but one person.

The creature's lament at Victor's deathbed reveals an intimate knowledge of his creator, even as his creator refuses to know himself. Remarkably, Walton permits the creature to remain in the presence of Victor's body, allowing the embodied grief of Victor to speak into the silence his death has cast. He numbers Victor among his victims and

laments the passing of his creator, as well the lengths to which he himself was driven by his double. When Walton accuses the creature further, the creature turns to him with an insight that Victor himself never possessed, explaining, "Think you that the groans of Clerval were music to my ears? My heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy; and, when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred, it did not endure the violence of the change, without torture such as you cannot even imagine" (219-220). The creature, created as a receptacle for the emotions that Victor could not bear, was overcome by the enormity of his creator's grief and cruelty. The creature, Victor's emotional heart, is the true victim of fate, as he "was the slave, not the master, of an impulse which [he] detested, yet could not disobey" (220). The creature finally resigns itself to a life without sympathy, since its hopes for fellow-feeling died with Victor. The creature's words can be read as those of a young Victor Frankenstein, lamenting, "...still I desired love and fellowship, and I was still spurned. Was there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all human kind sinned against me?" (221)

The character of Victor Frankenstein can best be summed up by the creature's words at his creator's deathbed: "Oh, Frankenstein! Generous and self-devoted being!" (193) Victor was a man who wished to be loved and seen, but whose unhealed grief turned those good desires into a selfishness that brought about nothing but destruction. It is the creature who is given the final word about his creator, and the creature who chooses to end the cycle of violence, pain, and grieving by extending empathy to his father and enemy: "What does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me? I, who irretrievably destroyed thee by destroying all thou lovedst" (193). He reaches out in understanding and compassion: confronting his grief and Victor's in a way that his creator

never would, and thus receiving the connection he had been searching for his entire life. The connection arrives too late, but still allows him to break the cycle of grief and grieving through his death—the cycle that Victor died while denying.

The ultimate enemy in the story of Victor Frankenstein is grief. Grief that cannot be outrun or outfought and must instead be understood, confronted, and accepted: grief that Victor's dismissive and invisible upbringing did not equip him to overcome. His creature, the creation and incarnation of his suffering, diagnoses the sickness, since he too is afflicted. The creature begs his father for a demonstration of the soul-healing empathy he desires—the empathy that would heal Victor, too—but is rejected thanks to the hard-heartedness of his creator. I argue for a grief-informed reading of this novel because I feel that in her writing, Shelley eschews the sort of quick answers and judgements that come naturally to human beings. She moves us to consider not only the plight of the creature, but the plight of Victor himself. We are asked to read with an uncommon kindness of heart: encouraged to step outside ourselves into empathy. Through a grief-informed reading of the novel, we demonstrate the very process by which Victor, the creature, and any of us may be cured of grief: empathetic connection. Though this empathy will not save Victor Frankenstein, it will surely change us. We can see our own griefs and the griefs of those we love through the pain of Victor, and we walk away, like Walton, sadder and wiser for our experience.

## CONFERENCE PAPER

"And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words, which found no true echo in my heart."

— Mary Shelley's Introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*

If I were to stand in front of a class of high school students who had just read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and ask them what they believe the central theme of the novel is, I am certain the conversation would quickly turn to Victor Frankenstein and his unchecked, egoistic ambition. I would surely also receive a colorful variety of condemnations, judgements, and criticisms upon his morals. Many critics and scholars would agree, as Victor is routinely vilified for the recklessness, selfishness, and above all, his ambition throughout the novel. Blind ambition is generally regarded as his primary sin and the novel's intended moral takeaway. However, in her introduction to the 1831 edition of her novel, Mary Shelley reveals a different understanding of the novel's central themes. What began as a simple horror story to pass the time and chill the blood has become, in her mind, a story about the nature of death and the process of grief. Beneath the surface, beyond the insistence of the protagonist, Shelley's novel beautifully expresses the dangers of grief unchecked, unexpressed, and unhealed. Victor wades through a childhood of isolation and into an adulthood of the same, launched into obsession by the death of his mother. His work to create his creature is prompted by the impulse to avoid

his feelings and his rejection of the creature is further avoidance of the reality of death and decay that the creature now represents. Shelley did not have the benefit of 21st-century psychology when writing the novel, but she was no stranger to loss. In fact, a reading of the novel in the context of modern grief psychology reveals a poignantly felt understanding of psycho-social costs of unexpressed grief.

Several prominent studies have examined the psychological motivation for Frankenstein's creation of the monster, many of which intersect aspects of grief psychology—for example, ideas of narcissism, invisibility/isolation, and rage—but few consider the role of grief specifically. One work that does is Matthew C. Brennan's article "The Landscape of Grief in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." In his piece, Brennan contends that Shelley's experience with grief is the driving force behind the novel and that her grief is communicated through Victor's character. He also argues for the creature as a creation born of Victor's grief (33), though his focus is less on the specific implications of this reading and more on the ways in which each character's changing opinions of and experiences with nature are used to express the theme of grief. Like Brennan, I believe that grief is the main motivator behind Victor's actions. Further, by closely reading the novel and supporting such a reading with modern grief psychology, greater insight can be gained into what Shelley has to say about grief and grieving through the characters of Victor and his creature. Victor's narcissism, isolation, and rage all contribute to and complicate his expression of the griefs he has endured.

Though the study of grief is as old as psychology itself, only recently has the field begun to characterize grief that steps beyond normal bounds. First, it will be helpful to dispense with the five-stage theory of grief, which is ubiquitous in popular psychology

and popular culture. The field has moved on from the popular five-stage theory of grieving toward a more nuanced system of categorizing and defining grief, one that allows for individual variance and does not uphold a certain grieving process as the standard. The present study will focus less on "normal" grief and more on grief that could be considered clinically abnormal. Abnormal grieving is usually called either "complicated" or "prolonged" grief.

At the time of writing, prolonged grief disorder (PGD) is among the most recent disorders added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V Text Revision (DSM-V-TR), which is, according to the American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology, used as the field standard for the diagnosis and classification of mental illnesses ("DSM-V"). PGD is indicated when the bereaved exhibits symptoms associated with grieving for a longer time or to a greater degree than the average. Often, severe symptoms present for longer than 6 months are required for this diagnosis. Notable symptoms include identity disruption (feeling as though oneself or part of oneself died with the deceased), avoidance of reminders of the loss, intense emotional pain (anger, bitterness, sorrow), difficulty resuming usual activity after a loss, and experiencing a sense of meaninglessness or intense loneliness (American Psychiatric Association 325). The distinction between normal and abnormal grieving is, of course, bound by the cultural and social norms in which a person is situated.

A focused examination of *Frankenstein* reveals that the DSM criteria for PGD often align with aspects of Victor Frankenstein's character. I believe that, by using what science currently reveals to us about complicated and prolonged grief, a better understanding of Victor Frankenstein's life, experiences, and responses can be reached.

PGD is a touchstone that I will return to throughout my discussion of Victor's childhood and his creation of the creature.

A person's readiness to confront any sort of psychological stress is partly determined by their background, and Victor Frankenstein is no different. Frankenstein's childhood has long been a point of debate among scholars, with many critics sharing the opinion that, despite Victor's own account, it was less than ideal. Victor insists upon the Elysian nature of his rearing, saying, "...it may be imagined that while every hour of my infant life I received a lesson of patience, of charity, and of self-control, I was so guided by a silken cord that all seemed but one train of enjoyment to me" (33). Despite his gushing approbations of his youth, note the "imagined" in this passage. He does not say it was truly joy and bliss, but that it could be imagined to be so. Others have likewise argued that Victor was too eager in his glowing descriptions and fervent assertions. Laura P. Claridge, for example contends that Victor's "continual exaggerations of familial love... reveals to us the inadequacy of the homelife that belies his oft-fevered protestations of attachment" (15), and further, that his unblemished memories are a psychological defense mechanism, protecting him from the realities of his childhood. Peering further into the text, she argues that Victor is objectified by his parents, being described as "their plaything and their idol" (Shelley 33). Further, she insists that, of all the virtues Victor lists as instilled in him by his parents (patience, charity, and self-control), he displays none of these qualities in his adult life (15). When viewed from this angle, Victor's childhood parallels the early days of the biblical Adam: the beloved creation of well-intentioned higher powers in whose community and equality he cannot share, alive in a world of perfection, but completely lacking companionship. Such a

lifelong loneliness would doubtless create an unsteady frame for Victor's view of himself, his emotions, and his experiences. His emotional isolation is expressed in his childhood relationship with Elizabeth, which Victor recounts solely in terms of possession, saying, "I...looked upon Elizabeth as mine—mine to protect, to love, and cherish. All praises bestowed on her, I received as made to a possession of my own" (36) and asserting that "until death, she was to be mine only" (36). To Victor, the people in his life are possessions to use, to have, or to lose. They, like him, have no agency of their own. Such a view informs how he will grieve the loss of such a possession and his mindset in creating another.

Regarding the hedging apparent in Victor's description of his childhood, another relevant point arises: it is a mistake to take Victor at his word. In telling his story to Walton, Victor has a specific desired moral outcome in mind: the demonization of ambition, while still protecting his own person from any real censure or judgement. These desires shape his retelling, requiring the reader to keep his aims in mind. Though he does not appear to lie outrightly, he displays so little self-awareness and awareness of others that his recollections must always be suspect. Lee Zimmerman argues that the root of Victor's problem with perception is his own invisibility: his inability to be truly seen by those around him, and his inability to truly see others. Zimmerman claims, "Victor experiences the self he presents to others as largely fraudulent" (146), which is mainly caused by his parents' misconceptions of his identity during childhood. Victor seems to have a dim awareness of the fact that his parents have wronged him, describing himself as "their child...whose future lot it was in their hands to direct to happiness or to misery, according as they fulfilled their duties to me" (33-34). If he is miserable, his parents must



have somehow directed him towards that future: somehow, they must have failed in their responsibilities. Even as Victor obliquely acknowledges their role in his suffering, he refuses to truly see the reality of his situation, choosing instead to ascribe all things to fate, unable to honestly appraise his childhood and the pain his past has caused. His complicated relationship with his family comes under even more intense stress when his family experiences a tragic loss.

Victor introduces the story of his mother's death as "the first misfortune of [his] life" (42) and "an omen... of [his] future misery" (42). As previously established, this protestation is likely somewhat erroneous, as no one makes it out of childhood entirely unscathed by disappointment, misfortune, and loss—especially not Victor Frankenstein. However, in this statement, he accurately pinpoints the connection between the death of his mother and the life he will lead, though he does not ascribe causality to the relationship. The account begins with Elizabeth's sickness and his mother's devotion to her, refusing to quarantine her adopted daughter and leave her without familial care. It is due his mother's ministrations that Elizabeth's recovery is credited, as Victor says, "her watchful attentions triumphed over the malignity of the distemper—Elizabeth was saved, but the consequences of this imprudence were fatal to her preserver" (42). On her deathbed, Caroline Frankenstein is as picturesque and perfect as she was in her life. She rues that she must leave behind a life where she is "so happy and beloved" (43). Before she dies, she lays on Victor and Elizabeth a heavy charge: to fulfill the hope of her life and be the consolation of Alphonse through their marriage, with Elizabeth seamlessly assuming the role Caroline must now abandon (43). Victor records no specific response

to this charge, his silence leaving space where a reader would expect to encounter an emotional response.

Continuing the theme of silence, Victor carefully avoids deeply describing the aftermath of his mother's passing. Victor stresses not that he is unable to describe the experience of grief, but that he "need not" (43) do so. Death is to him "the most irreparable evil" (43) characterized by the recognition of a new, dark, reality lurking in the benignity of the present world and the despairing looks he observes on the face of the bereaved. Victor's only apparent genuine, introspective claim is phrased in an objective third-person: "It is so long before the mind can persuade itself that she, whom we saw every day, and whose very existence appeared a part of our own, can have departed for ever" (43). He struggles to reconcile the reality of his loss and to live in the new absence this loss has created. The peculiar phrase "whose very existence appeared a part of our own" is a further indication of the unhealthy family dynamics the reader has already observed among the Frankensteins. In psychological literature, this subsuming of identity, this entangling, is referred to as "enmeshment". In an enmeshed family, members are overly involved in one another's personal lives, making any differentiation of the self or exercise of autonomy difficult, leaving each constituent identity unstable without the others ("enmeshment"). In an enmeshed family, grief becomes a particularly dangerous process. Victor has lost not only his mother, but a part of himself. He once possessed her and she once possessed him, but now, no longer. He cannot lean on his family for real support, either, as they all have lost a part of themselves, leaving them all incomplete and inadequate to reconcile with their loss.

Another point of pressure on young Victor is the constant, looming presence of his father. Before being shipped off to Ingolstadt for school, he ends his account of grief by expressing the necessity of moving on after a loss. His actions, however, betray his resolute words, revealing his reluctance to leave his home. He says, "my departure for Ingolstadt... was now again determined upon... it appeared to me sacrilege to so soon leave... the house of mourning, and to rush into the thick of life" (43-44). Note especially the passive language as he speaks of his departure: it was determined upon, and, it seems, not by him. He obtained his leave from his father and seems helpless against his father's insistence that life proceed as normal. Alphonse Frankenstein appears as an unsympathetic, smothering, shadowed figure in the background of Victor's grief, disregarding his son's desires in favor of his own. Throughout the text and especially prominent in his response to grief, Victor's thoughts are a confused hash of his own and his father's, which further establishes Victor as a man possessing a fragile identity. His other model in grieving is Elizabeth, who hides her grief and, as promised, subsumes herself into the role Caroline left vacant. Victor assumes that "she forgot even her own regret in her endeavors to make us forget" (44). He takes Elizabeth's composure and responsibility at face value without ever interrogating what may lie behind the appearance, as he is inclined to do. Through the pressure from his father and the example set by Elizabeth, Victor's enmeshed and vulnerable sense of self leaves him unable to directly confront his grief which he instead buries underneath the appearance of normal life. However, grief buried unhealed does not vanish, but rather festers.

Victor's ultimate choice regarding how to avoid his grief is to throw himself into his work. Avoidance is a common practice among those who have experienced a loss and

is often used to regulate distressing emotions (Baker et al. 2016). Avoidance is, according to Baker et al., "an integral component of the initial, acute grief response" (534).

However, an over-reliance on avoiding emotions, thoughts, and behaviors associated with the deceased can allow acute feelings of grief to persist for abnormal periods of time and contribute to the development of complicated grief (534). Baker et. al's study additionally found that avoidance-based coping strategies may be more prevalent in younger adults (543) and that avoidance was highest when the loss was caused by a short illness (543), both of which fit Victor's situation. Further, a study by Lipp and O'Brein found that college students who engaged in avoidant coping strategies were more likely to experience complicated or prolonged grief (193). Avoidance, when over-practiced, does not allow the loss to become a reality of the bereaved's life, causing more emotional and cognitive issues than it alleviates.

However, Victor is not able to entirely avoid the feelings he refuses to engage with, as the distant awareness of his family's strife haunts him as he pursues his gruesome ends. The initial inspiration to create his monster occurs exactly when Victor begins to consider returning home after two years away (51). While working toward the monster's creation, he guiltily remembers his father's injunction that correspondence with his family ought to be his first priority (55), but he justifies his refusal to correspond by explaining that he, "wished, as it were, to procrastinate all that related to [his] feelings of affection until the great object which swallowed up every habit of [his] nature, should be completed" (55). In other words, despite the obligations that weigh often on his mind, he elects to avoid every emotional aspect of his life and pour all of his energy and attention into the creature's creation. The work shoves his emotional life out of his mind, allowing

him to disregard and ignore it. Nowhere in the text do we see Victor attempt to confront the reality of his loss. Instead, his unhealed grief is exacerbated by the emotional weight of familial obligations and channeled into his work as he practices avoidance of despair through his obsessive act of creation.

Regarding his obsession, Victor portrays his drive to create in a decidedly negative light but stops short of identifying grief as the cause. When he at last discovers the secret of restoring life to corpses, he describes himself as akin to "the Arabian who had been buried with the dead and found a passage to life" (53), once again alluding to the reality of death that haunts him and his desire to escape it. Though there are moments of inexpressible, transcendent passion during his work, he overall deems the pursuit as deleterious, as he "seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit" (54). Victor further stresses the ghastliness of his situation, saying, "...my enthusiasm was checked by my anxiety, and I appeared rather like one doomed by slavery to toil in the mines, or any other unwholesome trade, than an artist occupied by his favorite employment" (56). These actions do not reveal the mental balance that Victor professes to admire so much, and it is to this imbalance that Victor credits his fault. He instructs Walton on this point, saying, "A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never allow a passion or transitory desire to disturb his tranquility" (55-56). In his mind, the perfect state for a human is one that experiences neither the heights nor the depths of emotion: no overwhelming happiness, no crushing grief, no overwhelming ambition, no exuberant joy. He desperately desires to keep his turbulent feelings inside, to never show an unsettled nature. However he might protest, though, his grief unsettles him. Instead of acknowledging the existence of such

overwhelming and uncomfortable feelings, he substitutes manic, addictive, obsessive work. The core cause of this frenzy is not ambition as he so ardently insists, but instead the unhealed grief he carries. Ambition is a misdiagnosis of Victor's problem and naught but a mask for the true war Victor is waging: a war against the reality of death and decay—a war motivated not by altruistic aims of curing all disease but instead by his own unexpressed grief.

The character of Victor Frankenstein can best be summed up by the creature's words at his creator's deathbed: "Oh, Frankenstein! Generous and self-devoted being!" (193) Victor was a man who wished to be loved and seen, but whose unhealed grief turned those good desires into a selfishness that brought about nothing but destruction. The ultimate enemy in the story of Victor Frankenstein is grief. Grief that cannot be outrun or outfought and must instead be understood, confronted, and accepted: grief that Victor's dismissive and invisible upbringing did not equip him to overcome. I argue for a grief-informed reading of this novel because I feel that in her writing, Shelley eschews the sort of quick answers and judgements that come naturally to human beings. She moves us to consider not only the plight of the creature, but the plight of Victor himself. We are asked to read with an uncommon kindness of heart: encouraged to step outside ourselves into empathy. Through a grief-informed reading of the early events of the novel, we begin to practice very process by which Victor, the creature, and any of us may be cured of grief: empathetic connection, which the novel will continue to explore and express.

## NOTES

1. The second chapter of Jeffrey Berman's *Narcissism and the Novel* is concerned entirely with Victor Frankenstein. He considers Victor as a near-textbook example of a narcissist, citing his turbulent expressions of both self-importance and deep unworthiness as a testament to the fragility of his self esteem (41). He credits this personality development to the neglect of Victor's parents (46). Lee Zimmerman stresses the invisibility Frankenstein felt as a child and continues to feel throughout the novel, as well as the rage such invisibility generates which encourages him to split off and disown such feelings in the form of his creature (139).
2. There is some disagreement in the field of psychology whether PGD and complicated grief are the same entity. Maciejewski *et al.* argue that though PGD and complicated grief are similar and share many traits/symptoms, the conditions are not interchangeable in a diagnostic context (271). However, for descriptive purposes, there is less substantive difference between the two terms. For the purpose of my argument, I will be citing studies on both PGD and complicated grief and will be using either PGD or complicated grief as the study specifies.
3. Throughout this discussion, I will be using the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*. Many of the revisions made by Shelley in this edition serve to highlight some of the themes discussed in this paper, including the dissonance surrounding Victor's retelling of the story and the doubling apparent in the text. For an excellent resource regarding these revisions, I recommend Nora Crook's article "In Defence of the 1831 *Frankenstein*".
4. I wish to note that, according to the APA Dictionary, a most instances of suicidal ideation do not result in a suicide attempt ("suicidal ideation").

## JOURNALS AND CONFERENCES

### Journals

#### 1. *Romanticism on the Net*

*Romanticism on the Net* is open access, online journal. At 10,000 words, my article fits neatly into their guidelines regarding length. They publish a variety of articles from a plethora of approaches, including a handful concerning the psychology of various Romantic texts. RoN's open access format makes it very accessible for classroom uses, and since I'm writing about a text that is often taught in high schools and early undergraduate courses, I feel that it could be appropriate to publish in a resource such as this one.

#### 2. *European Romantic Review*

The *European Romantic Review* is particularly interested in the literature and culture of Europe, Great Britain, and the Americas during the Romantic period. In their aims and scope, they specifically mention psychological interests of authors as an area of focus, with which a psychology-focused reading of *Frankenstein* fits neatly. They have published on *Frankenstein* many times, but never with a focus closely intersecting my own, allowing me to contribute something valuable to the conversation about the novel.

#### 3. *ELH*

*ELH* invites scholarly articles related to all literature in English, particularly seeking out work they define as "groundbreaking" in the field. They have a history of publishing on *Frankenstein* from various angles. I believe that my article might be of



interest to a journal that seeks scholarly approaches that redefine readings rather than exploration of specific niches.

### Conferences

#### *1. International Conference on Romanticism*

Because of the International Conference on Romanticism's specific interest in interdisciplinary approaches to Romantic scholarship, I feel that my article would likely be a good fit for this conference. They also specify that they are particularly interested in supporting the work of younger scholars, which might better my chances to present my work before those who are more experienced in the field.

#### *2. BARS - British Association for Romantic Studies (Early Career and Postgraduate Conference)*

Besides its International Conference, BARS also hosts an Early Career and Postgraduate Conference that is specifically geared toward allowing younger scholars to connect with other scholars and gain experience presenting. BARS's wide range of interests means that my article will likely fit well into its scope.

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