Title of Paper: Reading and Misreading in Frankenstein: A Primer for Domestic Romanticism

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Abstract: One of Mary Shelley's narrative techniques in Frankenstein is her showcasing of characters' misreading of key texts to which they refer. This misreading is one strategy by which Shelley reveals the destructive characteristics of second-generation Romanticism as compared to the more humane or "domestic" values of the earlier Romantics, Coleridge and Wordsworth.

Keywords: reading, misreading, intertextuality, Romanticism, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, narration, Rime of the Ancient Mariner

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It has long been recognized that in *Frankenstein* the concept of intertextuality is a rich field for critical inquiry. Allusions to writers and works play a part in the layered meanings of the novel; the landscapes themselves are read as texts; and more explicitly, the “reading lists” of characters serve as keys to Mary Shelley’s themes. It does not seem to have been noticed, however, that the characters’ reading of texts is a nuanced element of the novel that goes beyond the content of the works read.

Specifically, the reception of these texts by characters in the novel is often flawed: they misread the works they allude to, and in so doing reveal their own biases, those that are at the center of the novel’s critique of romanticism. I propose that Shelley employs misreading as one way of representing character flaws of the Romantic ego that she critiques in the novel.

An important part of this strategic representation is to show that the characters Victor and Walton, who are trapped in a world of patriarchal values and self-absorbed romanticism, misread key texts that they allude to. This misreading, I argue, is Shelley’s way of demonstrating that these characters are unable to read a text—or a situation construed as a text—in any way but that which promotes their own ideals. Further, they are blind to their own motives even as they are blind to the ethical themes of the texts that they reference. In fact, the instances of misreading constitute an important strategy by which Shelley establishes the novel’s values.

The device of misreading is introduced early in the novel, in the Letters that Robert Walton writes home to his sister, Margaret Saville, as he plans his voyage of discovery to the Arctic. In Letter 2, he attempts to mollify her objections to this project:
“I am going to unexplored regions, to ‘the land of mist and snow,’ but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety or if I should come back to you as worn and woeful as the ‘Ancient Mariner.’ You will smile at my allusion, but I will disclose a secret. I have often attributed my attachment to, my passionate enthusiasm for, the dangerous mysteries of ocean to that production of the most imaginative of modern poets.” ¹

Walton makes no further reference to The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, and the reader could easily overlook its strategic place in the novel’s network of values. But in fact, Walton’s remark is an early hint of the importance of reading in Frankenstein, revealing Mary Shelley’s use of first-person narration to allow perceptive readers to critique her characters. In this instance, the narration suggests to a wary reader that Walton has misread Coleridge and that Walton’s Arctic journey is itself a distortion of the philosophy developed by the first-generation Romantics. Walton’s misreading of Coleridge is an ethical one.

Today’s readers are familiar with the moral themes of the Ancient Mariner. The poem makes its message obvious in the closing stanzas, which promote the values of community life. The character of the Ancient Mariner has, through most of the poem, ignored these values by taking lightly the qualities of fellowship and the sanctity of all life. The Mariner learns his mistake only after undergoing the penance of working with the zombie crew:

The body of my brother’s son
Stood by me, knee to knee
The body and I pulled at one rope,
But he said nought to me. (341-44)
Before undergoing this penance, the Mariner’s curse is lifted when, while gazing at the sea-snakes visible in the water beneath the ship, he sees their beauty and blesses them spontaneously, without thinking (282-85). The unconscious nature of the blessing is important, for the killing of the albatross was also a thoughtless deed, done for no apparent reason and therefore an indication of the Mariner’s debased consciousness or lack of grace. The healing of the Mariner’s soul is signaled in his unpremeditated blessing of “all things both great and small” represented by the sea snakes in the climactic passage.

The ethics of community promoted by the poem are reinforced by the character of the Wedding Guest, who at the beginning of the poem is more concerned about the banquet than about the solemnity of the marriage. It is this frivolous character to whom the Mariner is compelled to tell his tale. As is well known, this relationship, this structure of obligatory confession, likewise informs the narrative structure of Frankenstein.

Robert Walton, on his own trip to an icy land, shows a similar unconcern for the values of community. He is unable to find a friend among the crew on his ship, despite his own admission of the ship master’s sterling qualities and those of the lieutenant. Walton continues to bemoan his loneliness and his need for someone “whose eyes would reply to mine” (28); he is unable to create a deep relationship with anyone except his double, who soon appears in the person of Victor Frankenstein.

Mary Shelley's own reading has been chronicled. It is well-known that she had looked through her mother's writing in the months prior to leaving England with Percy. As for her reading of fiction, some of the books she perused were epistolary
The Victorian novels, including *Clarissa* in 1815. As many have noted, the narrative structure of *Frankenstein* is in fact epistolary, since both the Creature's and Victor's stories are communicated by Robert Walton in a letter to his sister, Margaret Saville. In addition to this primary structure, letters between Victor and his family also figure importantly in the plot and in character development.

Discussing 18th-century reception of epistolary novels and their apparent efforts at truthfulness, Charlotte Sleigh notes, "Writing in an artificial form (the first person, in the case of the novel) was not deceitful if it were used to invite conversation, the tasteful, drawing-room equivalent of interrogation" (6). Sleigh goes on to discuss *Frankenstein's* nested structure in terms of its layers of storytelling and its implication of the reader in conferring judgement: "The power of reading was that it could emulate conversation. Epistolary and layered books were conversations overheard, where the reader's responses could be rehearsed and weighed" (7). Sleigh's analysis of Shelley's technique works toward an account of *Frankenstein* as a novel in which the characters and the readers are involved in an attempt to "facilitate correct judgement" through writing (8). It is true, I agree, that all parties in the narratives act in good faith as they recount their tales. They speak in earnest to each other, in letters as well as in person. Yet Victor and Walton both require more than an objective audience; they need, as Walton puts it, "eyes that look into mine" in order to be assured of understanding. They are not really interested in working out a mediated truth, but in establishing that their own perceptions are the only possible reality. Thus Walton, while admitting to his sister that both the master and the lieutenant on
board his ship are excellent men with admirable qualities, bemoans the lack of a friend; as we come to understand, it is because he can accept only his psychological double.

When we consider Walton’s loneliness, his Romantic yearning for glory, and his subsequent ecstatic reception of Victor aboard his ship, we begin to appreciate a character’s capacity for self-delusion, and the care taken by Shelley to depict this flaw while retaining the reader's sympathy for the character. Of course, readers expect that some characters in novels will be wrong. What takes Shelley's technique to a deeper psychological level is her use of textual references to illustrate self-deception. The fact that the texts in question are those of Coleridge and Wordsworth indicate that Shelley is working with a value system that pits the second generation of Romantics against literary fathers.

When we realize Walton’s self-absorption, we understand that his reference to the Ancient Mariner constitutes a misreading of the poem’s values. He reads the poem as the tale of a man whose mistake was killing that lucky albatross rather than the more serious, and more symbolic, transgression of ignoring the sanctity of life and community. Walton further reveals his erroneous take on the poem when he notes its influence on him as fostering his passion for “the dangerous mysteries of ocean” (30). It is as if Walton reads the poem as an exotic adventure narrative and nothing more. Moreover, by his own admission, Walton’s trip to the Arctic has as its goal his own enshrinement as one of the most renowned benefactors of humanity: “you cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation” (26). He asks his sister, “dear Margaret, do I not deserve to accomplish
some great purpose? My life might have been passed in ease and luxury; but I preferred glory” (27). Both Walton and Victor conflate glory and humanitarianism in descriptions of their quests; this “Romanticized” benevolence is summed up in the Creature’s pithy salute to the dead Victor aboard Walton’s ship: “Oh Frankenstein! generous and self-devoted being!” (182). For Walton as for Victor, the claim of being counted among humanity’s greatest benefactors subconsciously excuses their incapacity for actual human interaction and respect for life.

Beth Lau, in her article “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Frankenstein,” also sees Mary Shelley’s use of the poem as a means of promoting the sanctity of life and the value of community; however, Lau views Walton as someone who, “unlike Victor, cherishes human ‘affection’” (210), citing Walton’s letters to his sister and his desire for a close friend. It is tempting to view Walton, in comparison with Victor, as a more open and affectionate character. But it is important to see that his self-proclaimed concern for his sister’s feelings, as well as his high regard for the men on his ship, is superficial and ostentatious, masking his real self-absorption. Walton’s personality is driven by the same factors destroying Victor: the ambition for glory; the need to justify himself to--while rebelling against--a godlike patriarchal figure; and the avoidance of intimacy with any except a double.

I think that the recognition of Walton as a potential Victor is important to an understanding of the novel’s values. Of further significance is the fact that both Walton and Victor are blind to their own ethical plights: they misread their own motives. Thus, misreading is thematized on the novel's psychological level, and that tendency to misread is carried through to the characters' references to literary works.
Mary Shelley's ingenious deployment of her characters' reception of texts is part of the novel's network of meaning in which an ethos of feminist or humane values is contrasted with Romantic egoism.

While I disagree with Lau about Walton, I think she makes an important point about Mary Shelley’s promotion of the Coleridgean ethic. Lau notes that Coleridge “shared Mary Shelley’s reservations about egotistical self-assertion and her belief in the importance of supportive human relationships” (211). It is not difficult to find these reservations reflected in Frankenstein. In fact, one could argue that an important moral of the story has been made explicit to a fault: it is to promote the values of “domestic affections,” a phrase used by Victor when he lectures Robert Walton against the dangers of becoming absorbed with one’s work:

"A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquillity. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befiting the human mind. If this rule were always observed; if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquillity of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved, Caesar would have spared his country, America would have been discovered more gradually, and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed.

But I forget that I am moralizing in the most interesting part of my tale, and your looks remind me to proceed." (57)
This speech, such an unexpected and arguably clumsy intrusion on Victor’s narration (coming at the end of ch. 4, just before the announcement of the Creature’s “birth”) can be seen as the novel's most explicit statement of its feminist theme. As many readers have noted, various episodes in the novel reinforce the idea that it is the gendered division of labor, or the “separation of spheres,” domestic and public, that is responsible for the split in Victor’s psyche, the split that results in his creation of what he considers a “monster” or “demon.” It is a tribute to the novel’s complex layering of meaning, produced in the psychological as well as the social register, that we can detect Shelley’s critique at work not only overtly in speeches such as the "moral” cited above, but in more subtle techniques such as characters’ interpretation of literary works.

Mary Shelley was a close witness to the influence of Coleridge and Wordsworth on the second generation of Romantic poets. Her trials and anguish as a result of Percy’s idealistic and egoistic excesses are well documented. Percy Shelley, it may be argued, is an icon of romantic self-absorption and misdirected idealism. As Christopher Small and others have noted, one of Percy’s early names for himself was “Victor”; other parallels exist between Victor Frankenstein and Percy Shelley (Small 205-08). In addition, the poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge are among the works listed in the Shelleys’ reading in the few years prior to the composition of

*Frankenstein.*

With these influences in mind, one can argue that in the novel’s scenarios of misreading, Mary makes use of first-generation Romantic works that she saw as representing the positive qualities of the age. Thus Walton, who is both idealistic and
overly ambitious, forgetting the domestic needs of his men and the love of his sister, cannot read the Ancient Mariner’s moral tale correctly. His romanticism is the kind Mary sees as destructive, unlike that of Coleridge and Wordsworth. Walton writes to his sister regarding his formative years, “when I perused for the first time, those poets whose effusions entranced my soul and lifted it to heaven. I also became a poet and for one year lived in a paradise of my own creation; I imagined that I also might obtain a niche in the temple where the names of Homer and Shakespeare are consecrated” (27). Walton’s misrepresentation of Coleridge’s values follows soon after that comment: “I have often attributed my attachment to, my passionate enthusiasm for, the dangerous mysteries of ocean, to that production [The Rime of the Ancient Mariner] of the most imaginative of modern poets” (30). In fact, Walton has conflated Percy Shelley and Coleridge in this passage of his letter. In other words, he reads Coleridge through the personality and values of Percy Shelley.

Another putative attribute of Percy that Mary has inscribed onto Walton’s character is his fixation upon himself. We can note Walton’s immediate valorization of his guest Victor’s character. Walton sees Victor as a noble soul, and one whose eyes respond to his own—the true friend whose lack Walton had complained of to his sister. The doubling of Victor and Walton occurs through several passages in the Letters until it is clear that Victor is compelled to tell his tale to one who shares his dangerous tendencies.

After Walton’s introductory narration, Victor himself later alludes to The Rime of the Ancient Mariner when, immediately after creating his “monster” and seeing it
appear at his window after his nightmare, he rushes into the streets of Ingolstadt, running from his reality:

Like one who, on a lonely road,
   Doth walk in fear and dread,
And, having once turned round, walks on,
   And turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful fiend
   Doth close behind him tread. (59)

Victor recites these lines as illustrating his state of mind as he tries to escape from the Creature and from his own tormented psyche. But he ignores the context of the passage, which is that of the Mariner's having finally expiated his curse and nearing his own harbor again. The Mariner, although afraid to look back, can look ahead to the harbor before him. Victor, however, recites the lines without even identifying the source, let alone the context. Able to “read” only from his own deluded perspective, Victor forces a text to apply to himself, in this case identifying himself as a victim stalked by a fiend, rather than someone who has just abandoned the creature to whom he has given life. In Victor’s reference to the poem we can again see Mary Shelley juxtaposing the character’s self-blindness with his actual situation, while simultaneously evoking the values represented by the referenced text.

As we can see from these examples, the act of reading as represented in *Frankenstein* conjoins the psychological and social forces portrayed in the novel. The Romantic texts that Mary reveres for their humane and domestic themes are misread by characters who are trapped in an egotism that is to blame for much of the world’s misery. And what has set this trap for Walton and Victor is a psychological need to live up to patriarchal standards of glory and conquest. This species of destructive
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Romanticism is represented, from the perspective of this novel, by the ideals of second-generation Romantics, notably Percy Shelley. These destructive values are contrasted with the more humane ideals represented by the poets who created Percy--the first generation of Romantics.

If Coleridge is one of the primary Romantic poets that Shelley alludes to in her web of ethics and reading in the novel, the other is of course Wordsworth. The novel’s alpine settings, especially the descriptions of Mont Blanc and Chamounix, remind us not only of Percy’s poem and the Shelleys’ visit to the area; they also evoke Wordsworth’s own romantic sublime. In fact, Percy’s poem “Mont Blanc” can be seen as a more starkly metaphysical and less domesticated “Tintern Abbey” in its treatment of the divine, “interfused” power of nature, completely lacking the subdued “music of humanity” that Wordsworth had come to value. To see how Mary uses the texts of Wordsworth as a site of misreading, we can turn to the character Henry Clerval.

After Victor has given life to his Creature, he collapses with exhaustion, and it is Clerval who nurses him. Clerval is a lover of pastoral nature; he has a “salubrious” effect on Victor while the two are together enjoying walks through the countryside around Ingolstadt (Ch. VI; 67). As a boy, Clerval had been fond of the arts while Victor was obsessed with learning the secrets of the physical world. Wordsworth himself contrasts the two kinds of knowledge—scientific and poetic—in his 1802 “Preface” to Lyrical Ballads. He describes the knowledge of the scientist as “a personal and individual acquisition, slow to come to us, and by no habitual and direct sympathy connecting us with our fellow-beings. The Man of Science seeks truth as a
remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude: the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion” (Wordsworth, "Preface" 606).

For Shelley’s characters, this description hits close to home. In Chapter 2, Victor describes the childhood temperaments of the group of inseparable friends: "It was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn; and whether it was the outward substance of things, or the inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man that occupied me, still my enquiries were directed to the metaphysical, or, in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world" (43). Contrasting with Victor's scientific passion is Clerval's love of humanity and of adventures. Both boys benefited from the female influence of Elizabeth:

The saintly soul of Elizabeth shone like a shrine-dedicated lamp in our peaceful home. Her sympathy was ours; her smile, her soft voice, the sweet glance of her celestial eyes, were ever there to bless and animate us. She was the living spirit of love to soften and attract: I might have become sullen in my study, rough through the ardour of my nature, but that she was there to subdue me to a semblance of her own gentleness. And Clerval—could aught ill entrench on the noble spirit of Clerval?—yet he might not have been so perfectly humane, so thoughtful in his generosity—so full of kindness and tenderness amidst his passion for adventurous exploit, had she not unfolded to him the real loveliness of beneficence, and made the doing good the end and aim of his soaring ambition. (43)

These remarks, coming early in the novel, help to establish its web of values when they are juxtaposed with other descriptions and events that reinforce Shelley’s valorization of domestic affections and her critique of forces that undermine them.
The positive characterization of Clerval cannot be separated from his Wordsworthian traits.

Along with Clerval’s sensitivity to humanity, his love of nature also marks him as a Wordsworthian figure who furthers Shelley’s promotion of a more domesticated romanticism. We hear from Henry that he would be glad to “pass [his] life” in Cumberland, when he and Victor are touring the Lake Country (137). In this part of the novel, Clerval is with Victor as he travels to England to fulfill the Creature’s request for a mate. While the two are traveling down the Rhine valley, Clerval speaks of his love for this kind of landscape and its superiority in his eyes to the wilder beauties of the Alps:

“This country, Victor, pleases me more than all those wonders. The mountains of Switzerland are more majestic and strange, but there is a charm in the banks of this divine river that I never saw equalled. Look at that castle which overhangs yon precipice; and that also on the island, almost concealed amongst the foliage of those lovely trees; and now that group of labourers coming from among their vines; and that village half hid in the recess of the mountain. Oh, surely the spirit that inhabits and guards this place has a soul more in harmony with man than those who pile the glacier or retire to the inaccessible peaks of the mountains of our own country.” (134)

This appreciation spoken by Clerval not only emphasizes his pastoral sensibilities, but the speech also echoes the opening of “Tintern Abbey,” in which the scene before Wordsworth contains mingled elements of wild and domesticated nature:

--Once again

Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
Which on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Among the woods and copses lose themselves. (4-13)

Further, Clerval's reference to "the spirit that inhabits and guards this place" is
Wordsworthian in its diction: the pantheistic Wordsworth of the 1790's writes of
"spirit" and "presences" in place of more theistic terms; the poem "Nutting," for example, ends with the statement, "for there is a spirit in the woods."

Clerval's self-descriptions in these passages assimilate him to the first
generation of Romantics in their values. Victor, however, immediately after Clerval's speech, engages in another misreading of Romantic texts. Remembering his now-dead friend, Victor praises Clerval as “a being formed ‘in the very poetry of nature.’”

He then recites lines from “Tintern Abbey” to illustrate Clerval’s sensibility:

"The sounding cataract
Haunted him like a passion; the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to him
An appetite; a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, or any interest
Unborrow'd from the eye. " (133)

The problem with Victor’s allusion to these lines is that they represent the young
Wordsworth in his “wild” stage of growth, before he has “learned / To look on nature,
not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity" ( "Lines," 89-92). Victor has chosen the one passage in the poem that describes himself better than it does Clerval, who we have learned from his own words, is a lover of the more pastoral side of nature, the side that connects nature with the domestic life of humanity.

I suggest that this passage represents Victor’s tendency to appreciate only the more sublime and self-reflecting aspects of the romantic personality shared by him and Clerval. Indeed, we may take the contrast between Victor and Henry as analogous of that between the second and first-generation Romantic poets as Mary Shelley seems to regard them. But what Mary seems to be suggesting is that the “extreme” Romanticism indulged in by Victor / Percy is a step too far from the values represented by the works of Coleridge and Wordsworth alluded to in the novel. In addition to Clerval, one other character represents the ethos of first-generation romanticism promoted by Mary Shelley. Ernest, the middle brother of Victor, is the only survivor among the Frankenstein circle preyed on by the Creature. Ernest develops into a young man who eventually decides to devote his life to the Swiss foreign service. He is described by Elizabeth as spending his time “in the open air, climbing the hills or rowing on the lake” (63), pursuits that align him more with the Wordsworthian Clerval than with Victor.

Victor’s love of the Alpine heights, of storms, and of sublime scenery in general is reiterated throughout the novel. He is most alive when amidst scenes devoid of human comfort—the ice fields of the Mer de Glace, the lightning displays above Mont Blanc, the stormy lake at midnight outside the city gates of Geneva. His
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descriptions of Mont Blanc are often paraphrasings of lines and ideas from Percy’s "Mont Blanc," lines celebrating the metaphysical, inhuman power represented by the mountain. But when we read Mary Shelley’s journal entries of her Chamounix excursion of July 1816, her words describing such landscapes are “desolate,” violent,” “vast and dreadful desolation,” “savage and colossal character” (Journals 113-119). Her characterization of Victor is of one whose delight in these scenes complements his “self-devoted” personality, his thirst for rebellion and glory. Victor says of his trip to the Mer de Glace that he went without a guide because “the presence of another would destroy the solitary grandeur of the scene” (88). In fact, Victor quotes from Percy Shelley's "Mont Blanc" in this chapter, and unlike his recitations from Coleridge and Wordsworth, this one involves no misreading. He aligns himself correctly with the poet of Mont Blanc's forbidding grandeur.

When we consider this aspect of Victor's personality, we must align it with his equally salient capacity for delusion and self-ignorance. Perhaps the most glaring example of this flaw is his misreading of the Creature’s threat “I will be with you on your wedding night,” which Victor interprets as a threat to his own safety when in fact it is Elizabeth who is the victim—with Victor’s abandonment of her facilitating her murder. Victor’s ignorance of his psychological inability to “be with” Elizabeth results in his misreading of the Creature’s threat. In another important example, we recall that the episode immediately preceding Victor’s solitary trip to Mont Blanc is that of Justine’s trial. In the aftermath of that debacle, Victor sees himself as the true victim, for Justine will have the consolations of death and innocence, while he, Victor, “felt the never-dying worm alive in [his] bosom, which allowed of no hope or
consolation” (82). It is then that Victor compares himself to Milton’s Satan: “I bore a hell within me, which nothing could extinguish” (82). We can see Victor working towards this declaration all through his narration: looking back on the events that he is recounting to Walton, he frequently insists that his fate was decreed, that his better angel was defeated, that he was led inexorably to this point of inextinguishable inner hell. Yet as much as he would like to see himself as Satan, this self-image is itself a misreading, for Satan’s act was a willful one, not that of a victim. The Creature, who also utters the line “I bore a hell within me” (118), is a far more accurate reader of Milton, for he takes the rebellious step voluntarily, setting fire to the cottage even as he knows it will mean the end of his “Adam” persona and the beginning of his demonic one.

Victor’s insistence on being both a victim of fate and a figure of glorious intention is, I suggest, part of his overall blindness, of which misreading is one symptom. To return to Coleridge, we see in his Statesman’s Manual (1816)³ a warning about the increasing popularity of Milton’s Satan as a role model:

This is the character which Milton has so philosophically as well as sublimely embodied in the Satan of his Paradise Lost. Alas! too often has it been embodied in real life! Too often has it given a dark and savage grandeur to the historic page! . . . And from inattention to the possibility of such a character as well as from ignorance of its elements, even men of honest intentions too frequently become fascinated. Nay, whole nations have been so far duped by this want of insight and reflection as to regard with palliative admiration, instead of wonder and abhorrence, the Molocks of human nature . . . . (Appendices, p. ix-x)
Mary Shelley has created in Victor a character who has also been duped by the Romantic image of Satanic rebellion and glory, to the exclusion of his domestic affections. At the novel’s end, when Walton has resumed the narration, he notes how Victor exhorts him to learn from his story and not repeat the mistake of following his reckless ambitions. In his description of the ruined Victor, we can see Walton’s own delusions: “What a glorious creature must he have been in the days of his prosperity, when he is thus noble and godlike in ruin! He seems to feel his own worth and the greatness of his fall” (175). Nor has Victor learned his own lesson, the one he is preaching to Walton, for when Walton’s crew begin to balk at their mission, Victor, contradicting his own advice, urges them to continue:

“All you, then, so easily turned from your design? Did you not call this a glorious expedition? . . . You were hereafter to be hailed as the benefactors of your species, your names adored as belonging to brave men who encountered death for honour and the benefit of mankind. . . . Oh! Be men, or be more than men. . . . This ice is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be; it is mutable and cannot withstand you if you say that it shall not. Do not return to your families with the stigma of disgrace marked on your brows.” (178)

This remarkable speech recapitulates many of Victor’s excesses and shows that despite his lectures to Walton on the necessity to preserve “domestic tranquillity,” he does not really understand his own enthrallment to the need for Romantic glory. Mary Shelley ends her portrayal of Victor with a scene not of his redemption but of his stubborn blindness to his own personality, although just before dying, as he asks Walton to destroy the Creature, he admits, “I may still be misled by passion” (180).

Charlotte Sleigh, describing how Walton must learn from Victor’s fate, not from his
words, notes, "The inconsistency between Frankenstein's words and fate are only too clear. Frankenstein has proved himself an unreliable witness; morally, he is not to be trusted" (8).

Sleigh argues that Shelley's Romanticism endows Walton, Victor, and the Creature with an alluring danger that saves the novel from being "a straightforward morality tale, as countless plodding critics have contended" (8-9) and that "the Romantic in Shelley revels in the horror of the events" (9).

Sleigh's contention exposes a central problem confronting readers of *Frankenstein*: the most intriguing parts of the novel are indeed ones in which Victor's obsession gains control and wreaks destruction on the lives of those he loves. Yet the "morality tale" will continue to battle against this display of Romantic excess. As Victor says to Walton during his narrative of the Creature's birth, "I forget that I am moralizing in the most interesting part of my tale, and your looks remind me to proceed" (57). This exchange—"your looks" being Walton's part in the dialogue—in fact mirrors the relationship of author / reader of this gothic story. Mary Shelley had to insert her moral that warns against any activity disrupting "tranquillity of , , , domestic affections" just at the point when this activity is about to result in Victor's moment of supreme, unlawful, and horrifying glory. Sleigh is correct in asserting that the reader "is drawn to Frankenstein's flashing eyes and Walton's outrageous ambitions. Silently, the reader urges both to press on, to see what happens next—otherwise, the book would be laid aside" (9). But the intrusion of the moral cannot be so easily overlooked, nor should it be attributed to "the Romantic" in Mary Shelley.
Rather, we must see this moralizing as Mary's protest against a force that she herself was a victim of.

What is a Romantic? Certainly, we should remind ourselves that "Romanticism" is not a term that the poets of this era used to describe themselves, their poetry, or their values. When I argue, then, that *Frankenstein* is a critique of second-generation Romanticism, what I mean is that Mary Shelley saw fault in some characteristics, values, and attitudes of Percy, and that she saw a corrective to those faults in some key texts of Coleridge and Wordsworth. A reader may find the most interesting parts of the novel to be, as Victor suggests, the least didactic ones. But had the digressions into moralizing not been included, or the misread poetic passages not alluded to, we would not be discussing the novel today. My suggestion is that Shelley wants the reader to draw distinctions between the varieties of Romanticism and to reject the selfish, destructive kind in favor of the kind represented by Clerval. This is why the Creature partakes of both kinds. The Creature is not carried away by his own Romanticism; he can reason, and can see himself becoming Satan.

In keeping with Shelley’s sweeping declaration quoted earlier—her claim that the world would be more humane if only the domestic affections were given their due—I would argue that the stakes of misreading are high. If characters such as Walton and Victor receive the text of key works in a way that reinforces their own delusions rather than inspiring them to higher thought, then how can men stop being “monsters”? What help is there? In contrast to Walton and Victor, the Creature is not only more aware of his own motivations and weaknesses, he also is a more sensitive
The Victorian reader, noting for example that Goethe’s novel “has for its object something outside of self” (112). The implication is that the kind of romanticism seen in the texts promoted by the novel can only be appreciated and instructive to a reader who is already enlightened. Victor’s inability to “read” the texts of Romantic sensibility in the way that Mary apparently receives them underscores the ethics of her novel but does not point to a remedy for the world's evils.

Notes

1. Page 30. This and other references to Frankenstein are to the Bedford-St. Martin’s edition, ed. Johanna M. Smith, which uses the 1831 text of the novel. The 1831 version expands this episode from the earlier version to include Walton's description of Coleridge.


3. The quotation, as Curran explains, is from "Leigh Hunt's Story of Rimini (1816) [which] recounts the legendary love of Francesca da Rimini and her brother-in-law, Paolo Malatesta, which is found in Dante's Inferno (5.73-138), in a style at once richly textured like a medieval tapestry and linguistically contemporary. His explanation for the illicit love was that the youthful Francesca was married to Paolo as a stand-in for his haughty older brother and fell in love with him at first sight. This quotation comes from the beginning of Canto 2, after the groom's elaborate wedding party arrives with the surrogate Paolo as "the very poetry of nature" (2.47) to fetch the bride." The allusion may be read as an indication of Victor's more-than-friendly love for Clerval, of which he seems unconscious. This is another example of "misreading" on the part of Victor.
4. Mary Shelley read this First "Lay Sermon" in 1817. according to her reading list as shown in Curran:  http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/MShelley/reading.html

Works Cited


---. "Lines Written a few Miles above Tintern Abbey." Gill 131-35.