

Ouroboros, Interrupted: Oedipal Impulses and Devastating Dichotomies

by Beth Hightower, De Anza College

Mentor: Julie Pesano

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the eponymous Victor Frankenstein becomes obsessed with the idea of creating artificial life, spending all his waking energy on the endeavor only to realize how repulsive his creation is after having brought him to life. His rejection of the daemon sets the remainder of the story in motion, leading him on his anguished quest for acceptance and, later, vengeance. As the sole progenitor of the creature, Frankenstein is effectively both mother and father to him. Thus, he simultaneously denies his son the warmth of a mother figure and the protection of a father figure. This denial further fuels the daemon's desires to attain each of these archetypal figures, embodied for him in the singular form of Frankenstein. Frankenstein's monster thereby exemplifies the Oedipus as well as the negative Oedipus complexes, yearning to both murder and merge with mother as well as father. In so doing, he seeks to consume himself as does the Ouroboros, which, as William Veeder writes in "The Negative Oedipus: Father, 'Frankenstein', and the Shelleys," builds off of the "motif recurrent in western culture and particularly central to literature and biography for the next hundred and fifty years—sons desiring to extirpate fathers and to sire themselves" (380) such that he may come to encompass his own creation and destruction, becoming at once the representation of immortality and of the void. As Steven Lehman writes in "The Motherless Child in Science Fiction: 'Frankenstein' and 'Moreau'," Frankenstein "refuses to accept the limitations of his male identity. He is the Modern Prometheus who not only trespasses divine territory, but challenges the divinely ordained, natural procreative role of the female" (52). That Frankenstein himself pursues the creation of the monster to begin with likewise illustrates the desire to become the life-giving mother even as the resultant child promises death. In this fashion, the lives of Frankenstein and his dark progeny are entwined together like a pair of interlocked rings, intersecting where their desires to make and unmake one another reside. Shelley thus demonstrates through Frankenstein and his daemon the interminable nature of the struggle between the longings for eternity and for oblivion in the context of the family structure.

Frankenstein's actions through the course of the novel stem largely from his desire to "ingest the female principle of eternity" (Veeder 380), with its ability to propagate ad infinitum, for "[like] the snake swallowing its tail, the male can [then] provide both the phallus and its receptacle. Siring oneself assures immortality by closing the generative cycle and thus precluding death" (Veeder 380). This is evident from the nature of his creation of the monster, although his attempt at ingestion fails. Frankenstein begins by "flee[ing] the affection of his 'more than sister' [Elizabeth] and [attempting] to usurp her biological female function" (Lehman 53), avoiding having to address the wishes of his family and Elizabeth that he wed her post-haste as he scavenges body parts and scrabbles them together into the semblance of life. Having been raised alongside Elizabeth, Frankenstein knows that she is essentially promised to him; he has no need to procure the ability to procreate on his own merely to generate issue. That he

expends the effort anyway demonstrates his desire to overtake and become the feminine, to rid himself of the need of any outside party or genuine female. He describes his ambitions in relation to grand scientific ideals and of man overcoming natural limits, yet for all the symbolic weight of the deed, the sole thing he generates is a single life, which goes with the belief that “men have created the larger forms of society, in fact, to compensate for their collective sense of procreative inferiority” (Lehman 53). Traditionally masculine environments and schools of thought, such as academia and the sciences, are here merely props to simultaneously disguise and assuage Frankenstein’s need to attain feminine fertility.

Yet this attempt is by necessity unnatural. Frankenstein himself says that after having “worked for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body” (Shelley 58), he “beheld the accomplishment of [his] toils [with] an anxiety that almost amounted to agony” (Shelley 58). That the gestation period for his unnatural baby is double that of a natural child is consistent with the idea of Frankenstein embodying both mother and father; in doing the work of two, he must necessarily take twice as long. Further, it highlights the unnatural basis of this pregnancy, for no human baby could stay in the womb for so long—no human baby in a mother’s womb would need to. His male body cannot provide for the development of his progeny any faster than this, and cannot align the progeny with nature, so opposed to it is his very endeavor. His sense of accomplishment and agony also is reminiscent of the feelings of a mother following a long and arduous labor, making the entire process a series of “compensating parodies of female fertility” (Lehman 53) on Frankenstein’s part. By taking on this maternal role in addition to his more conventional role as father, Frankenstein initially rejects natural procreation, refusing to accept nature’s dominion over his fertility or virility. The massive size of the monster turns him into a giant phallic symbol for his father, a way by which he can assert his dominance over nature itself in his ability to circumvent its laws. Yet, as Joyce Carol Oates writes in “Frankenstein’s Fallen Angel,” the daemon “cannot be blessed or loved: he springs not from a natural union but has been forged in what Frankenstein calls a ‘workshop of filthy creation’” (550). As such, Frankenstein reacts with horror upon taking in the countenance of his progeny, and in so doing he confirms nature’s power over him, rejecting his unnatural son in a bid to protect his own sense of masculinity and virility, threatened as they are by the prospect of this large, elongated, muscular male given the unnatural feminine role he has unthinkingly imposed upon himself.

The daemon, meanwhile, sees Frankenstein as his mother as well as father, and as such seeks this mother’s love without fear of any overriding Oedipal principle. Following his birth, “[h]e held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on [Frankenstein]” (Shelley 59). That the location this purposeful approach centers upon is a bed positions Frankenstein firstly as mother, and secondly as the Oedipal mother-as-lover. The folds of the bed’s sheets appeal as a womb-like, enveloping source of comfort while also inviting further sexual trysts within. In his rejection of his monstrous son at this juncture, Frankenstein refuses to accept the emasculating, subordinating roles of either mother or lover to this overgrown phallus. This fear of being emasculated further extends to Frankenstein’s fear of being killed, literally as well as sexually, with the daemon serving as personification of male carnal desire in the form of a phallus as well as a phallic weapon in and of himself, capable of bringing Frankenstein to climax and to the climactic finale of his life in a single stroke.

Having realized that he is helpless before the might of his unnatural creation, Frankenstein redoubles his efforts to attain the feminine principle of eternity, this time choosing the natural route. His long-time companion and fiancée Elizabeth serves as the locus of his hopes, for she represents the possibility of fathering children with another instead of with himself. Although he has yet to consummate his love for her, and indeed, never manages to muster his virile might to the task, he still feels that “in [his] Elizabeth [he] possessed a treasure” (Shelley 193). By producing a natural-born child, Frankenstein intends to extend his existence by proxy. The daemon, however, tells Frankenstein that he “will be with [him] on [his] wedding-night” (Shelley 173) after having had his would-be mate and sister destroyed by their father, implying that, having been denied alternative sources of affection all his life, he will turn to Frankenstein’s mate, Elizabeth, thus causing an obstruction in Frankenstein’s plan to produce a child. This serves the function of denying Frankenstein both a mate and a mother, figures Frankenstein has denied the monster, which in turn denies him his connection to the whole of the natural world, as it is through “[feeling] the affections of a sensitive being [the female]” (Shelley 150) that the daemon intends to “become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which [he is] now excluded” (Shelley 150). This affects Frankenstein in this way because in addition to carrying a womb within her, Elizabeth also carries the conceptual role of a mother. Frankenstein’s mother dies from the same bout of illness from which Elizabeth recovers, creating what Paul Sherwin, in his essay “Frankenstein: Creation as Catastrophe,” calls “the guilt-ridden withdrawal of attachment to the mother, a process allied to the transferal of Frankenstein’s love to Elizabeth” (885). In addition to this link is Frankenstein’s nightmare of seeing Elizabeth walking on the streets, and “as [he] imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features started to change, and [he] thought that [he] held the corpse of [his] dead mother in [his] arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and [he] saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of flannel” (Shelley 59). Frankenstein thus connects his mother to Elizabeth, with the possibility of the latter’s death now carrying the added significance of the mother’s demise, which in itself implies the absence of eternity, for “Elizabeth is the mother’s corpse, and in embracing this cousin-sister-bride Frankenstein reaches through her to take hold of the maternal body he intends to possess” (Sherwin 887). Frankenstein cannot hope to live and recur ad infinitum if his origin point is cut off in the form of his mother and if her conceptual heir dies, too, in the form of Elizabeth. The phallic worms crawling about on her body in the dream show that Frankenstein already has an awareness, albeit subconscious, that a threat to his masculinity is what will cost him all he holds dear. Fittingly, Frankenstein does not fear for his own fate in this scenario, but for that of Elizabeth, and therefore determines to fight with his son on her behalf. This, in addition to all of his earlier rejections, further indicates Frankenstein’s jealousy over the physical superiority his creation displays in musculature and pure masculine mass, for his son, living and capable of reproducing in his own right, as implied by Frankenstein’s professed fears of him and the she-monster procreating, now poses a threat to his authority and power as the progenitor. In this, Frankenstein’s fearful denial of the creature represents his avoidance of being symbolically castrated, robbed of all his reproductive powers in the form of competition from his stronger, more virile son.

Supporting this notion is Frankenstein's belief that the wedding-night "was the period fixed for the fulfillment of [his] destiny" (Shelley 173) when he "should die, and at once satisfy and extinguish [the creature's] malice" (Shelley 173). That Frankenstein links the idea of destiny with his night of consummation with Elizabeth demonstrates that his purpose in life is to procreate, but in a natural fashion this time. Death is also connected to sex here, as Frankenstein fully anticipates that his decidedly unnatural son will kill him following his sexual "death" within Elizabeth, whose womb would serve as the metaphorical coffin from which life would spring, just as the daemon is brought forth from the many graves Frankenstein has looted. As such, Frankenstein intends his wedding night to be at once a one night stand and a final stand, the former purposed to plant his seed, and the latter purposed to end his son, harkening back to the common practice of infanticide following the takeover of a new male and thereby indicating Frankenstein's fear that the daemon will extinguish his family line if he does not eliminate him. That he "resolved not to fall before [his] enemy without a bitter struggle" (Shelley 173) shows that while he intends to do his best to preserve the new progeny he envisions developing within Elizabeth, he has little intention of surviving this attempt, for so long as he has put up a bitter struggle he can accept his own fall. That Frankenstein "carried pistols and a dagger constantly about [him]" (Shelley 196), all of which are phallic weapons, demonstrates the degree to which his masculinity and his sense of self as a powerful, protective father-to-be feels threatened by the reappearance of the son.

Frankenstein, however, fails to fully grasp the motives of the daemon. While he, too, seeks consummation on the wedding night, he eschews trying to take Elizabeth for his mate, as would perhaps be more befitting a true Oedipus complex, but nonetheless kills her, which adds something of a sexual note to the encounter given the significant prior associations made between sex and death. Rather, the creature acts out of jealousy, the source of which is twofold: first, the father having received love, affection, and other stereotypically womanly attributes, all of which the son has been denied in the destruction of his intended mate, and second, Elizabeth and the as-yet-unborn offspring she represents having occupied all of his father's time and devotion, which likewise he has been denied. While the monster does not realize this consciously, "[union] with the father can occur [...] only after woman is removed" (Veeder 369). As such, the creature's act is a manifestation of not only his desire for revenge for his deprivation and the abortion of his sister-mate, but his need to monopolize the attention of his father. Her killing is "at once a way of establishing a relationship with the only human being to whom he can claim kinship and a desperately anti-erotic act designed to teach his creator what he suffers" (Sherwin 889). In this way, it is as though the daemon seeks to take Elizabeth's place in connection to Frankenstein, and as a being both male and artificial standing in for the natural and female Elizabeth, the creature effectively prevents Frankenstein from having any fruitful act of coupling, leaving him only his unnatural son, from whom he at long last cannot turn his attention. Even as the killing unfolds, however, Frankenstein "could feel the blood trickling in [his] veins, and tingling in the extremities of [his] limbs" (Shelley 199), a description that is reminiscent of a burgeoning erection. While he is not the one to die here, he partakes in the sexual act of death between his lover and his son, creating yet another bond between himself and the daemon through their *ménage à trois*. The monster thus binds their fates together in unholy matrimony, fulfilling his promise to "be with [him] on [his] wedding-night" (Shelley 173) with their deaths at the end of the novel serving as their consummation, "at once [satisfying] and

[extinguishing]" (Shelley 173) the drive for literal and metaphorically sexual death in both Frankenstein and his creation.

Perhaps more importantly, this consummation also is the culmination of the conflict created by the daemon's Oedipus and negative Oedipus complexes: in order to get to the mother and father figures he respectively seeks, he must kill their partners, but in this case, they are one and the same. In eliminating the obstructing parental figures, the daemon eliminates also that which he desires above all else, leaving him only the option of diving into death alongside his lost parent, thus settling for the orgasmic bond forged by death in place of the one they could have had while yet living. In this manner, the quests of both the mother-father and the son in *Frankenstein* to encompass male and female, life and death, eternity and emptiness end in mutual destruction, preventing the Ouroboros from stretching its teeth around its tail. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley "encourages young men to indulge their envy of female procreative predominance, understand the punishment which awaits trespassing against natural and/or divine limitations in this regard, and renounce their competitive envy" (Lehman 53), for this is an end only made possible through the unnatural nature of their familial bond; were they to have had a normal family structure, this struggle would either have not occurred at all or have lacked such a clean conclusion as that provided by mutual devastation. The tensions created by the dichotomies they seek to encompass, however, stand as integral parts of the family dynamic, ubiquitous for as long as people still chase eternity through procreation and, consequently, the oblivion of death through orgasm.

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