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Mary Shelley, an Autobiographer

Takami Hirai

The whole story in the first edition of *Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus* in 1818 (hereafter abbreviated as *Frankenstein*) is told by three concentric pairs of tellers and addressees. The novel starts in the journal letters of a seafarer Robert Walton to his only living sister, Margaret Saville, reporting an incident he witnessed on his way to the Pole. He tells how Victor Frankenstein, the protagonist, has confessed to him in anguish the story of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter, and the consequences it brought to him. He has tracked ‘nature’ relentlessly in order to satisfy his egotistic desire for conquest, violating her ‘hiding places’ (37).¹ The monster, ‘a being’ like him (37), his double, is the product of his strong self-assertion, his self-consciousness, and its monstrousness is symbolic of his failure in ‘soul-making.’² Within Victor’s confessional narrative, the monster tells him of his miserable loneliness after he was abandoned. It is placed in the central part of the novel, and the originality in describing the monster is often praised as Mary Shelley’s most impressive achievement.³ This creature, a symbolic ‘agent of Frankenstein’s egotism’ (Poovey 90), finally brings about the collapse of all the Frankenstein domestic tranquility. The journal letters of Walton to Saville appear again at the end of the novel, thus forming and closing the outer-frame for the whole story. In the course of the novel, each member of the family, involved in the incidents and the problems underlying them in his or her own peculiar way, plays an important part.

The monster has a dual, autobiographical meaning to its author, Mary Shelley. By creating a symbolic image, she could successfully relocate anxiety about her identity as a woman and author, placed in the family system of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie;⁴ she could also reflect her ambivalent feeling about her own ‘monstrosity’ as the offspring of a unique family of literary celebrities. She had for her parents William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft and for her husband Percy Bysshe
Shelley. Establishing her identity as an authoress by writing *Frankenstein* had entailed a ‘monstrous externalization’ of her inner phantasies (Bronfen 36). Her success in writing would mean, for her, the affirmation of the spiritual legacy of her family; but, at the same time, it would not free her from the sense of guilt since her identity as an authoress was established at the price of another woman writer, her mother, who died giving birth to her. Besides, Mary, when writing this novel, was something of a social outcast, severely criticized for the politically radical ideas of her parents to which she seemed to be a truly legitimate heir as endorsed by her own subversive behavior.5

The aim of this paper is to make clear what Mary Shelley tells us about her identity as a woman writer placed in the family system of the age, mirroring herself in the image of the monster. Hers is the age of Sensibility, or Romanticism, the period of ‘affective individualism’ as Allen Richardson calls it, based on the arguments of Lawrence Stone (Richardson 14). According to Stone, each individual in a family is tied to the others through ‘the affectionate bonding’ (Stone 22). This is one of the key features of the modern family conceived as a functional organization. It should be noted, as Richardson also explains, that, during this period, the distinctly separated gender roles —characterized by the public, exposed sphere of the male and the private, domestic sphere of the female— was still largely preserved.

I will look at the Frankensteins, a typical bourgeois family, in the perspective of Stone’s ‘mentalité,’ or Philippe Ariès’s ‘feeling.’ According to Stone, due to the transformations of ‘mentalité’ in the middle and upper classes of English society, the modern family as an organization has been well established by 1750. Ariès claims that in Europe by the eighteenth century ‘the members of the family were united by feeling, habit and their way of life,’ so that the family structure could gratify ‘a desire for privacy and also a craving for identity’ (Ariès 413). Stone’s ‘mentalité’ and Ariès’s ‘feeling’ point to the ground where the English Romantic Poets tried to complete a vital, dialectical movement of ‘soul-making,’ struggling with the desire to overcome self-consciousness (Hartman 49-53).6

I

To the third edition of *Frankenstein*, published in 1831, fourteen years after the first, Mary appends an Introduction (175-181) in which
she explains in her own words why she, ‘then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea.’ Although she had apparently been unwilling to bring herself forward in print as an authoress, she tells how she hit upon the idea of writing a story while traveling with ‘the cares of a family’ on her mind. Here she tells us how she ‘thought of a story,’ a germ which was to grow into *Frankenstein*. In a ‘waking dream’ (180) that came unbidden, as if possessed and guided by her imagination, in the summer of 1816, she saw a student of ‘unhallowed arts’ finally complete his creation of an autonomous being, by infusing a spark of life into inanimate matter. She tells us the terror she felt in her dream before she is awakened:

> I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter; and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench for ever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life. He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.

(179-180, emphases mine)

Then she explains how this weird phantasm, having possessed and haunted her, was finally transformed into her ghost story. At the end of the Introduction she calls *Frankenstein* her ‘hideous progeny’ which she bids go forth and prosper, and for which she has affection (180). Here Mary’s intention in writing and her attitude toward the finished product are clearly delineated.

Obviously she analogizes the ‘pale student’ of her dream with Victor, the protagonist of *Frankenstein*, and ‘his odious handywork, horror-stricken,’ with the monster. As soon as his ‘waking dream’ is successfully actualized and spontaneously worked out, Victor reacts in exactly the same way as the student did in Mary’s ‘waking dream’:
now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bed-chamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep. (40)

When he is awakened by the creature, he turns away and flees from it, abandoning it to its fate. Here is another analogy with the author’s account in the Introduction, allowing us to read the story as her autobiography. Johnson suggests that *Frankenstein* is ‘the story of the experience of writing *Frankenstein*’ (Johnson 62-63).

In each narration of the three concentric pairs of tellers and addressees in the story, Mary presents one artistic persona, a first-person narrator: Walton, Victor, and the monster. Victor and Walton share the glorious ambition of benefiting mankind by accomplishing some great purpose, and a desire to have the company of a man who can sympathize with him, a brother of the heart, whose eyes would reply to the other’s (13). The monster’s accusation of Victor is suggestive of two of a kind:

> Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God in pity made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of your’s, more horrid from its very resemblance. (97)

Listening to the distress of this ‘filthy type’ of his own self, Victor must have felt the same horrible misery as did ‘the student of unhallowed arts’ in the dream. When the student saw the creature looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes, he must have seen his own wretched image reflected in them (180).

Thus, Victor and the monster are halves of the same self; and Victor and Walton are sympathetic and compassionate to each other, as to a brother or a friend. However, they all are solitary figures, far removed from the domestic tranquility of the fireside. We can only expect that some relationship based on ‘the affectionate bonding’ is to be established between Walton and Margaret. She is the only character in the novel leading a happy, family life with lovely children. He needs her to support his lonely spirits (15), and, though he is on a voyage and as far from the peace of his home as are the other narrators, he never forgets ‘keeping’ (13), which means ‘conformity’ in painting, and is always greatly in need of a friend who would show affection. He feels genuine sympathy for Victor’s deep, habitual grief, as if he were his brother. Living in the real world without having anything to do with Victor’s
creation, he informs his sister of his friend’s misery. It can be said that he, as a mouthpiece of the author, is telling us, by means of Victor’s creation, her own life story and her longing for the family in which she hopes she could live a happy life.

II

The monster in the Alphonse Frankenstein family is not born as a blessed child but is produced in the laboratory of Victor, a scientist whose desire is not to serve others, but to assert his own selfhood, searching for the quintessence of life and death. The monster can never be an organic member of the family; it is by nature made to destroy their domestic harmony.

The Franksteins have been distinguished members of the bourgeoisie of Geneva and Alphonse has apparently established a typical happy home, with a beautiful, submissive wife and three children, surrounded by heartwarming friends and faithful servants. Henry Clerval who is constantly with the Franksteins, is included in their domestic circle (24). The overall image reminds us of William Hogarth’s The Strode Family (Praz 101), a painting from the genre called Conversation Pieces popular in the eighteenth century. There the configuration of the family looks exactly like the Alphonse Franksteins, all of them enjoying blissful moments at the fireside. If Victor had married Elizabeth Lavenza, following the expectation of his mother, Caroline Beaufort, the continuance of the Franksteins would have been secured. Caroline would have ever been holding ‘an air of her dignity and beauty,’ assured of domestic stability, even when she is kneeling by the coffin of her dead father in despair (56). Victor equates this image of his mother with the guardian angel in the picture standing over the mantelpiece in the library when he returns home.

Alphonse’s family seems to be well-organized with a patriarchal father at its center and modest, self-devoted women, who love and guard their home as ‘heaven-sent’ beings (191), encircling him, shining like ‘a shrine-dedicated lamp’ (194). In addition to this, we can see some typically patriarchal characteristics or virtues of the nineteenth-century bourgeois family in Alphonse’s marriage with Caroline, in the adoption of Elizabeth, and in the antecedents of Justine Moritz, a faithful servant. But, at the same time, it should be noted that here is no indication of that ‘intensified affective bonding’ with which the modern
family is associated.

After his obsessive desire has been ultimately satisfied, Victor is so convinced of the success of his frenzied undertaking that he boasts in exaltation that ‘No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs’ (37). However, after this moment of exultation, his bold self-assertion brings the ego’s destructiveness upon him; his strong ego-consciousness has never made him glorious in his adolescence in the course of ‘soul-making.’ It brings him a nightmare, in which his future wife, Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, is transformed in his arms into the corpse of his dead mother, Caroline. She is enveloped in a shroud, and in the folds of her flannel the grave-worms are crawling (40). This is clearly contrasted to her image in the picture in the library at home, and suggests that domestic tranquility is no longer expected in the future. His indulgence in his selfish desire has made him pay no attention to the worries and concerns that have been made known to him by other members of the Alphonse family. Elizabeth is not free from the misgiving that Victor regrets their connection and, seeing him so lonely and unhappy, is compelled to ask him, ‘Do you not love another?’ (144). Here she is effectively exposing Victor’s lack of sympathy and love, but the significance of the conversation is not developed. Richardson regards Victor in this state as assuming ‘the extreme pose of a feminized Romantic creator,’ in attempting to bear a child with the aid only of rationality and science. ‘Victor can create a kind of life, but what he cannot give is precisely what the reproduction of mothering in women assures: sympathy, love, nurturing’ (Richardson, 22). Anne K. Mellor sees him as a typical male, living in the sphere of public (masculine) power separated from that of private (feminine) power; as Victor cannot work and love at the same time, he fails to feel empathy with others (Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* 116). Neither the tenderness nor the beauty of Elizabeth can redeem his soul: he says that ‘the very accents of love were ineffectual’ (210). As she cannot actively engage in his life after all, they can never be genuine companions for each other in the nuclear family. Kate Ellis points out that Elizabeth is not a real force in the novel, being too superficial and monotonous, although she is meant to be ‘the living spirit of love to soften and attract’ (194); she is simply performing one of the chief duties of the female sex as Thomas Gisborne puts it in *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797) (Ellis, *The Contested Castle* 194-5). The lovely Caroline also never plays the role of ‘the model of all excellence’ (46), an angel mother in a
bourgeois family. Although she is adored by other women, it is her portrait that, afterwards, is to lead the monster to the murdering of his victims one by one (56); she turns out to be an effective accomplice in their deaths. Not only Caroline and other female members of the family but also the males, for example, Alphonse, are helpless, failing to take active preventive measures against a time of crisis, when Justine is suspected of being William’s murderer.

Neither Victor nor his monster can gratify Ariès’s ‘a desire for privacy and also a craving for identity’ in their home. Victor cannot establish his identity in his own family but the monster is in a more difficult predicament. Having no father, mother, friends, and relations, he is always compelled to wonder who he is, what he is, whence he comes; these questions recur to him without offering any answers (96). Because of his ugliness, he is driven away by the De Laceys, an apparently ideal family of which the monster wishes to be an adopted member. The De Laceys, descended from the prosperous bourgeoisie of France, are an archetype of the egalitarian, interdependent, benevolent, and mutually loving nuclear family (Mellor, ‘Possessing Nature: The Female in Frankenstein’ 229-230). Safie, who is taught by her mother to aspire to higher powers of intellect and an independence of spirit, is enchanting ‘in a country where women were allowed to take a rank in society’ (92). She seems to be an independent, ideal woman in a modern family, quite different from other female members of the Frankenstein household. But she and the De Laceys, the idealized figures of sexual equality and mutual affection, cannot survive long in the novel; they are a temporarily glimpsed hope which vanishes all too soon. Mellor suggests that for Mary Shelley this ideal archetypal family cannot be found anywhere in the Western Europe of the nineteenth century, the world she lives in (Mellor, ‘Possessing Nature: The Female in Frankenstein’ 223). After being exiled from their home, the monster is forced to recognize itself in its true monstrosity. Then Victor refuses his demand for a female companion, an indispensable requirement for creating a family. Thus, decisively denied domestic affection as a child or as a husband, the monster’s hatred of his creator mounts to an uncontrollable degree, and he embarks on acts of vengeance, murdering all that are dear to Victor: William, Justine Moritz, and Clerval. Finding the marks of fingers left around each neck, Victor recognizes in anguish that he himself is the true murderer; the being who is endowed with the will and power to do such deeds is nothing but his ‘own spirit,’ his ‘own vampire’; it was he who let it ‘loose into the world’ (55).
Elizabeth who would have borne him children is finally killed by
the monster on their wedding night. Victor’s whole family is destroyed
by his creation, and, in this way, his egotistic quest for nature, violat-
ing her ‘hiding places,’ is given just punishment. Nature’s revenge on
his attempt to transgress her boundaries is complete, when Victor’s
chase of the monster ends in the killing of both halves of one self, on
the field of ice and snow in the Arctic.

III

It is often pointed out that, in the description of the monster’s birth,
Mary alludes to a phantom lady in the Poet’s waking dream from Percy
Shelley’s *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude* (1816). The lady has fled
from him before she, the Poet’s ideal beauty, is made flesh (*Alastor* 148-
191). Here a single narrator, unlike in *Frankenstein*, tells the story of
the Poet who eagerly tries to pursue a fleeting shade that fluctuates
between illusion and reality. It is a dream-image in the real world, a
beautiful shape that fails to be incarnated. Duncan Wu explains in the
footnotes that the Poet’s love is ‘narcissistic, directed to an ideal con-
ceived within his own mind’ (Wu 829). In *Alastor* the Poet is struggling
to overcome his selfhood as symbolized by the phantom lady. The
same doomed Romantic quest can be seen in Keats’ *Endymion* IV 406-
483, one of the archetypal poems of English Romanticism. Endymion
sees an unknown goddess in his dream on Mount Latmos, whose
charmed touch makes him faint and distracted. After wandering around
to search for her, he seems to find her identified with Phoebe, the
moment he awakes. He cries perplexedly, ‘Is there nought for me, /
Upon the bourne of bliss, but misery?’ (460-461), and, being so dis-
traughtly enchanted with the fair goddess, he wonders doubtfully what,
from whence, and where is that soul. His pursuit of her is brilliantly
described until he is united with Cynthia, his selfhood melting into a
radiance at the end of the poem. In Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the
Ancient Mariner’, the Mariner blesses, in his waking dream, the water
snakes unconsciously and spontaneously, which appear to be participat-
ing in the serene order of the universe and to be in the fulfillment of
their being. At this moment he passes from the purgatorial self trapped
in the isolation of a heightened self-consciousness to regain control of
his imagination, and his soul is led to salvation.

In contrast to the protagonists of these poems, Victor adheres to an
elevated degree of egotistic consciousness, and is never able to ‘forget his guilt in creating a lonely consciousness’ (Bloom 7). The monster is an almost literal embodiment of ‘the monster of narcissism’ (Homans 139). Victor’s creation can never be a healing power, a guide that will free him from the prison of the self and lead him to immortality, because it has no natural ground upon which to make its abilities function. It is the projection of Victor’s egotistic pursuit, and does not reflect his inner world but is objectified and miserable, far from being brilliant.

Thus, Victor’s imaginative product in his waking dream, a metaphor of the imagination, proves to be quite different from that of the Romantic poets. They have fought against self-consciousness, trying to transcend early limitations by means of imaginative vision. They explored the possibilities of transition from self-consciousness to imagination (Hartman 49-53). But Victor’s egotism cannot share the higher imaginative world of the poets. What he enjoys is not creation itself, but only the processes leading up to it. Homans explains this as ‘the seemingly endless chain of signifiers that constitute his true, if unrecognized, desire (Homans 141). The creature is the undesired embodiment of a Romantic imaginative desire.

Meanwhile, the product of Victor’s imagination, the monster, recognizes his monstrosity for the first time when he sees his own image mirrored in a transparent pool. Terrified at his own reflection, he becomes completely convinced that he is nothing but what he looks like, a monster (85). Here Mary alludes to Paradise Lost IV 456-462 where Eve reflects herself in ‘the clear / smooth Lake’. Milton’s suggestion is that her absorption in her own beautiful image hints plainly at her moral ugliness, her potential for spiritual deformity (Gilbert and Gubar 240). Mary supplements the description of Eve in Paradise Lost by introducing a physically ugly monster. It is actually a representation of a woman with her self-conceit and monstrosity laid bare. This Eve turns out to be not so luminous as the Eve in Adam’s dream, which Keats compares to imagination (Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November, 1817, Rollins, Vol. I 185). The monster, ‘a filthy type’ of the creator’s ‘more horrid from its very resemblance,’ finally comes to the revelation that, comparing himself with Adam, Satan, and God, he deserves the name of nothing but Eve, in helplessness, isolation, and the bitter gall of Satanic envy. The monster is perfectly identified with a vile, monstrous woman. He is nothing less than a symbolized figure of a woman in patriarchal society. Though given a human’s nobler aspirations, this monstrous woman ‘cannot enter the human commu-
nity it longs to join, and it cannot earn the sympathy it can all too vividly imagine’ (Poovey 90). Gilbert and Gubar also see the monster’s physical ugliness as representing, in addition to moral deformity, social illegitimacy, bastardy, and the namelessness of a woman (Gilbert and Gubar 241).

When in the Introduction to the 1831 edition Mary, a woman preoccupied with ‘the cares of a family’, tells us how she got the idea for writing a story, she is expressing her anxiety metaphorically in the image of the artist’s creature. Similarly, we can find that the monster in the novel symbolizes insecurity and tension within her identity. *Frankenstein* is born as a ‘hideous’ work like the creature itself, produced by a woman writer, whose image is also as wretched as is the creation of her pen. It can be said that Mary succeeded in bringing into the daylight the anxieties of an authoress. As she can only write about her own act of writing, about her own life, she is always an autobiographer. Here lies the true significance of the novel. Victor, a man living in patriarchal society, has irreverently deluded himself that he is given a woman’s biological prerogative to bear children. Mary made her literary creation and literary activities overlap with Victor’s creative act. He transgresses and violates the bounds of humanity with his egoism, and she can succeed only in the Gothic style, expressing her conflict in the image of a miscreated monster. The Gothic novel is a type of fiction with a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror, dealing with aberrant psychological states (Abrams 78).

It should be examined in more detail whether Mary, leading a real, everyday life, has identified the image of an ideal family with the Romantic imagination. But at least in *Frankenstein* she must have had doubts or uncertainties concerning Romantic desire, as it could lead to the collapse of a family. Bronfen claims that since ‘in *Frankenstein* the desired object turns out to be a monster and is accordingly repudiated by its own father’ it can be ‘interpreted as Mary’s radical critique of romantic desire’ (Bronfen 33).

**IV**

In spite of Mary’s radical critique of Romantic desire, it is clear that what Mary criticizes and ultimately denies is not the Romantic imagination itself. There are many instances which show us that she has deep sympathy with Romantic sensitivity to natural beauty and Romantic
aesthetics. For examples, she describes Clerval, who is devoted to the wonders of nature, as a beloved friend of Victor, citing lines 76-83 from Wordsworth’s ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’: 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’ . . . (120). Moreover, it is not too much to say that Mary possesses ‘Negative Capability’, as is evident in the following description by Walton of the noble-minded Victor who is in misery, his spirits broken:

no one can feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature. The starry sky, the sea, and every sight afforded by these wonderful regions, seems still to have the power of elevating his soul from earth. Such a man has a double existence: he may suffer misery, and be overwhelmed by disappointments; yet, when he has retired into himself, he will be like a celestial spirit, that has a halo around him, within whose circle no grief or folly ventures. (19)

Here one can see that Keats’ Negative Capability helps us identify a characteristically Romantic aesthetic sensibility.9

What Mary criticizes is not the Romantic imagination but its possible consequences and especially the actual product which it may bring forth. She warns it not to go too far. In Mellor’s view, she has perceived that the Romantic imagination, grounded on a never-ending, perhaps never successful, effort to marry the finite and the infinite, is too frequently indifferent to the progeny of that union. The Romantic ideology represents its own poems as self-consuming artifacts within a never-ending dialectical process, and values the creative act above the created product. Mary believes that a poet must take responsibility for his actions, for the predictable consequences of his poems, as well as for the abstract ideals he serves (Mellor, Mary Shelly: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters 80).

In her criticism she offers conservative views where she was expected to be a radical. In the Introduction to the 1831 edition, she explains that she shall answer the question of how she, ‘then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea.’ As quoted above in Section I, in Mary’s dream, the bold student who has mocked the stupendous mechanism of the Creator is frightened at his temerity, and strongly desires to stifle for ever the transient existence of such a hideous corpse in the grave. These passages prove that Mary does not dare to create such a horrible creature for herself and it consti-
tutes a suitable answer to the question posed by general readers of the novel. This justifies Poovey’s explanation: that ‘she once pursued metaphysical speculations now seems, first of all, a defiance of one’s proper place—here the male’s in relation to God, but also, by extension, woman’s in relation to the family’ (Poovey 101). Poovey considers the boldness of the student here as, not only the boldness of the male in relation to God, but also, by extension, a defiance of the woman in her proper place in relation to the family. I agree with Poovey that by 1831 Mary was no longer a defiant child who dared to introduce a monstrosity which might lead to the collapse of the family bonds, but, as a grown woman, seeking herself within the humility proper to a lady (Poovey 100). It was precisely because she wanted to express and emphasize this attitude more clearly that she considerably revised the former production in 1831. In the novel she is more gravely concerned with Victor’s egotistic, monstrous self-assertion than with the social conventions that inhibit her creativity.

When finishing her writing of *Frankenstein*, Mary would inevitably return to her own real family bonds. Bronfen says that ‘in her own life she was forced to learn that the intellectual legacy of her parents was inextricably interwoven with the monstrosity of being socially outcast’ (Bronfen 36). Bronfen examines Mary’s text of the novel in intertextual terms, showing how it establishes and deconstructs her family bonds at the same time, and claims that she, while recognizing the spiritual legacy of her politically radical parents, makes an extraordinarily conservative plea for real family bonds (Bronfen 36). She reads *Frankenstein* as Mary Shelley’s family romance10, in which she misreads or rewrites the works of her parents and her husband. It has made her realize the spiritual legacy of her parents and, at the same time, allowed her to come to terms with some unconventional behavior of her own, a materialization of the liberal political ideas of her parents that had resulted in an unbearable ostracism. Shelley wrote in the Preface to the 1818 version, in the character of Mary, that ‘my chief concern’ in the story is ‘the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection’ (8). But does this reflect Mary’s real intention? When the monster is rejected by Victor, is not the pain it feels Mary’s own? Could she not sense that she is being rejected by her husband, as, even if she embodies the goal of his poetic quest, he, as a poet, has disowned any form of embodiment?

Godwin recorded a happy image of his family life with Wollestonecraft and Fanny, in Chapter Nine of *Memoirs of the Author of ‘a Vindication of the Rights of Woman’*:  

52 Mary Shelley, an Autobiographer
She was a worshipper of domestic life. She loved to observe the
growth of affection between me and her daughter, then three years
of age, as well as my anxiety respecting the child not yet born.

(Memoirs 262)

Although his plain-speaking about his own wife in this book was
severely attacked at the time, Tamae Mizuta puts a high value on the
bonds between members of his family (Mizuta 126-127, 152-154). The
domestic peace which produced ‘a sort of opening of the heart, a general
expression of confidence and affectionate soul, a sort of infantile, yet
dignified endearment’(Memoirs 262) is taken to be an essential element
of modern family as characterized by Stone and Ariès. Mizuta points
out that Godwin’s encounter with Wollstonecraft and his marriage with
her modified his radical theory which had entirely denied the marriage
system and he was finally converted. In contrast to the family of the
author’s parents, there is no close bond, no ‘amiableness of domestic
affection’ at all in the family presented in Frankenstein.

The narrative strategy in Frankenstein is to separate Victor’s self-
assertion from its consequences by transmitting the story in three
distinct narratives each told from a single definitive viewpoint. Poovey
explains that this technique enables Mary to express her profound
ambivalence toward Victor’s creative act: ‘she is able to dramatize both
her conventional judgment of the evils of egotism and her emotional
engagement in the imaginative act’ (Poovey 93). Here Mary is effect-
ively shown to be conflicting between self-assertion and social
acceptance, between self-expression and effacement, not only in the
novel itself, but also in her relation to her own family bonds. Mary
Wollstonecraft, on the publication of A Short Residence in Sweden,
Norway, and Denmark (1796), commented on the fact that she always
writes in the first person:

I...determined to let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained,
as I perceived that I could not give a just description of what I saw,
but by relating the effect different objects had produced on my mind
and feelings, whilst the impression was still fresh.

(Advertisement 62)

In the 1831 Introduction, Mary Shelley is unwilling to bring herself for-
ward in print. Her ambivalent story-telling strategy shows us that she
is not so straightforward and unrestricted in writing her autobiogra-
phical novel, Frankenstein, as her mother was in the travelogue.
Notes

* This paper is an expanded revision of my essay in Japanese: ‘Frankenstein or, the Modern Prometheus no Kazoku-zo (The Family Bonds in Frankenstein or, the Modern Prometheus)’ in Roman-ha Bungaku no Sugata II: ‘Michinaru sonzai yosiki’ wo motomete (The Image of Romantic Literature II: In Quest of ‘the Unknown Forms of Existence’, Tokyo: Eihosha, 2004) 171-185.

1 All quotations are taken from Nora Crook, ed., The Novels and Works of Mary Shelley, Vol.1, Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1996).

2 The ‘soul-making’, so designated by Keats, is a process through which the human mind realizes its identity, each one becoming personally itself and attaining immortality. (Letter to the George Keatses, 21 April 1819. Rollins, Vol.II 102.)

3 For example, see Poovey 91 and Bloom 7.

4 Though the Frankensteins set up their home in Geneva, it is clearly a representation of an English upper middle-class family. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall assert that the study of the family of this period is not meant to be purely local. Such a study addresses questions pertinent to the whole of English society even though the answers mainly concern a specific section of the provincial middle class (Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall 34-35). The basic argument about the family structure can be generally applicable, even though the specific case may be located in Switzerland or in England.

5 For instance, her elopement with Percy Bysshe Shelley who had a pregnant wife, her disownment by Godwin, her own pregnancy, her children’s deaths one after another, poverty, the infidelities of her husband, etc.

6 Kate Ellis, a feminist, foregrounds the home in this novel as a fortress where the feminine sphere of domesticity and the masculine sphere of discovery are separated. She interestingly argues that the Gothic novel creates ‘a resistance to an ideology that imprisons them even as it posits a sphere of safety for’ women (Ellis, The Contested Castle Introduction x). Although her ideas are full of useful suggestions, I think she is so involved in the ideology that she does not refer to the Gothic elements in this novel, where Mary represents her anxiety in dynamic terms as a woman placed in a bourgeois family (Ellis, The Contested Castle 181-206).

7 For example, Homans 139 and Bronfen 33.

8 References to the poems are as follows: Alaster to Romanticism: An Anthology edited by Dunkan Wu, Endymion to The Poems of John Keats edited by Miriam Allott, Paradise Lost to Paradise Lost edited by Elledge Scott, and The Rime of The Ancient Mariner and ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’ to Romantic Poetry and Prose edited by Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling.

9 ‘Negative Capability’ is the quality which Keats believes as essential in
forming ‘a Man of Achievement especially in Literature.’ Thus endowed, a man ‘is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts’; he ‘would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge.’ (Letter to George and Tom Keats, 27 December, 1817. Rollins, Vol. I 193.)

10 Bloom says that ‘Poetry is the anxiety of influence,’ meaning that poets are always intimidated by the shadow of a strong poet who came before them, as sons are oppressed by their fathers; in this sense, he also says that ‘Poetry is Family Romance’ (The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry 95). Bronfen applies this theory to Frankenstein.

Works Cited


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