Since its original publication in 1818, critics have been probing the text to identify what exactly it is that makes Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* so monstrous. In her “Stumbling Against the Corpse: Urban Horror and the Modern Reader in *Frankenstein*,” Kathleen Gurnett suggests that part of the story’s horror is fueled by the way in which spaces of death were physically and culturally structured in early nineteenth century Europe. Gurnett presents a compelling argument and illustrations of aspects of the horrific that might escape modern readers unfamiliar with cemeteries, charnel houses, and dissecting rooms—the spaces themselves as well as their place in the collective British imagination at a certain point in history—yet does not address the fact that many modern readers, despite this deficiency, are still horrified. While Gurnett may be right in her assertion that spaces of death are most appalling to those most familiar with them, I believe the disgust stemming from their role in the story is not the only or most potent element of its horrific nature for either the contemporary or modern reader. There are certain moments in the text that set readers ill at ease regardless of their technical knowledge of early nineteenth century space and society: when Victor and his creation interact for the first time; when the monster sees himself in a pool of water and is overcome with his own ugliness; when Victor and his new bride strangely interact on the boat carrying them to Evian. In each of these moments, there is something amiss and something similar occurring which involves the use of image. Each of these instances involves a reflection, mirrored images, contemplation twisted from its source in some way which is somehow adverse to the mind.

It is these twisted reflections, the kind that possess the power to influence feeling and, subsequently, events, which Shelley explores in her tale and is a key element in not only the creation of the literal monster but the creation of the monstrous. They are what drive the story and define it as horrific. Through both literal instances of reflection and in mirror-qualities embedded more metaphorically within the narrative, Shelley both creates and defines monstrosity, that which is at once self and other, and somehow appalling in that similarity. The consequences of these reflections for the characters in the tale shed light upon the consequences of reflection more generally.

In order to more closely examine these images of reflection evoked in the text, it is necessary to have some clarification as to what exactly is meant by “reflection.” Reflection is “an image produced by or seen in a reflective surface” and also “the action or process of thinking carefully or deeply about a particular subject, typically involving influence from one’s past life or experience” (OED). A more general definition and one which I feel pertains most directly to each of the instances of literal reflections as well as the larger logic in the narrative structure of *Frankenstein*: “anything which arises
from, or is a consequence of, something else; an outward manifestation of an underlying condition or cause" (OED). Another feature of reflection having more to do, perhaps, with its perception than its definition is the quality of reversal tied in with it. Touch your right hand to a mirror and your reflected image reaches toward you with its left. The image is inverted in relation to the subject. A reversal is implied by the mental process of reflection as well: “implying an ensuing change or reversal of opinion” (OED). Finally, I’ll point out that since reflection is, in many cases, both the action and the result produced by that action, it is in its very definition already obscuring cause and effect relationships.

Now that the properties of “reflection,” as process and product, have been delineated to some extent, I would like to examine the ways in which Shelley explores these properties and uses them to display the horror within certain moments in the text, moments whose horrific appeal seem not to have faded for the modern reader through time and distance from the text’s historical context. Through this examination, the peculiar ways the human mind interacts with the idea of reflection—which in itself contains no necessarily horrific element—become apparent as a more general source of tension in the novel. In the following, I will attempt to provide examples from the text and consider specifically how Shelley’s picture of reflection and the mind in each is so very frightful. The interaction between the two, the mind and the reflected image, is ultimately the chief element of abjection throughout the novel, which readers of all eras respond to with a sense of horror.

**Reflection as a Mirroring Process of Creator and Creation: Victor’s Reflection**

I would first like to address the moment of the creature’s creation, specifically Victor’s reaction upon meeting the creature’s gaze. The creature at this point functions as a kind of mirror, and Victor is horrified by what he sees there.

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavored to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! - Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips. (Shelley 85)

In his “Mirror Images and Otherness in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein,” Dean Franco wonders why Victor did not understand the horrific consequences of his creation while creating it. Why is he so shocked and appalled at the physical appearance of something he himself assembled? Franco believes “the reason for Victor’s sudden insight has to do with seeing and self-perception” (Franco 80). I would agree, and add reflection. The creature is assembled much in the way of an art object, which is a kind of reflection of its creator, a something "which arises from something
else” (OED). The image itself is distinct but not inseparable from the process of its creation. It is the latter which is in this case horrific.

Shelley, immediately before these passages, separates the process of creation from the product of this creation with a chapter break, marking the sudden transition that readers see unfold in Victor's affections. Before bestowing animation on the beast, Victor first describes “the lifeless thing that lay at my feet” as “the accomplishment of my toils” (Shelley 84). But, when the “dull yellow eye” of the creature opens, Victor is suddenly overcome with “horror and disgust” (84). His creation, which he describes in visual terms much like a painting (“proportion,” “contrast,” “lustrous black,” etc.) (84), he realizes is not beautiful at all. He describes its aspect as “unendurable” (84). He is the artist and cause of this object and the fact that it is a reflection, a mirrored image, of his own person is the “sudden realization” (84) Franco describes. He goes on to describe the gaze Victor holds with the monster in terms of an Oedipal conflict, a disgust at the desire for the “(m)Other” (Franco 81).

In other words, Victor is startled by gazing into a reflection that does not resemble his own image of himself. This in itself is the primary shock and distressing factor, though it can be analyzed on the level of the subconscious as well, which Franco has aptly done. When Victor asks, “How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch” (Shelley 85), Franco attributes the language to the fact that Victor has “formed” (85) the monster, yet is unable to contain him. Yet, it seems Victor is expressing a conscious confusion of identity as well in this language. Gazing into a mirror, his eyes are met by those of a stranger, and one who is hideous in appearance. Victor cannot describe his own emotions because, at this moment, “his” identity does not make sense. He cannot “delineate the wretch” (85) because he is unsure where to place the identity of the “wretch.” Later, the “wretch” will be used to describe both the monster and its creator; this shared vocabulary suggests the inseparable nature of the pair's identity. The horror and monstrosity here is in the confusion and convergence of cause and effect, the artist and the artwork. Victor has become to himself a hideous stranger, something Other, and as a result, his conception of a natural order and consistency collapses.

Victor seems to deal with this collapse of order and personal identity through a process Julia Kristeva describes in Powers of Horror as “syntactical passivation.” This process, “which heralds the subject’s ability to put himself in the place of the object” is also the “logic of the construction of the phobic object” (Kristeva 39). This process allows the subject to create a metaphor for the object, and separates it from the “I.” These phobic objects then join “an entire world of others toward which they escape” (39). The result of these hallucinatory objects, which find their origin in the subject, such as the monster's relation to Frankenstein, is that they produce a profound sense of horror in the subject. This is a process of detachment from the “I,” a way of intellectualizing the self in a way that is acceptable to the self’s image of the self. In the moment of creation, Victor describes both the monster and himself in passive terms, deflecting his association
with both as a means of defending his identity and, in this deflection of self, generating horror. Victor is able to recount that “those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion” (Shelley 86), but seems unable to bear the statement that “I rendered those muscles and joints.” This use of the passive presents further indication of the collapse of his identity into subjectivity. There is a strange object in the mirror, and the subject is no longer sure where to place himself in relation; the world is no longer in order and becomes a waking dream. This sudden dislocation of identity through something unrecognizable in one’s own reflection is the key source of horror in this case, the almost unthinkable implications of a sudden, open-eyed disruption of self.

While Victor recognizes himself in the eyes of his monster, the mutual gaze does not produce identical effects upon the monstrous identity, the creature. There is a basic discrepancy between the two sides of this mirror, despite their convergence of identity. The creature does not at this point see Victor as a reflection of himself, furthering Victor’s deep sense of alienation and the reader’s unease at this point. This failure to perceive relatedness on the creature’s part can be accounted for by the creature’s developmental stage: just an infant, beginning to become self-aware but not yet able to self-recognize. In *Exploring Lifespan Development*, contemporary psychologist Laura Berk describes babies’ capacity for “intermodal perception,” which supports the beginning of self-recognition. Berk describes this perception as such: “As they feel their own touch, feel and watch their limbs move, and feel and hear themselves cry, babies experience intermodal matches that differentiate their own body from surrounding bodies and objects” (Berk 157). This perception is evident in the creature’s description of the time period immediately after his awakening which it appears can be likened, developmentally, to the early infancy of a human child: “A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt, at the same time… I walked…the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again” (129-130). While the stages the creature goes through can be read similarly to those of a human child, the creature seems to develop at an accelerated rate. Soon, much sooner than a human child, he can identify himself in a reflected image, signifying and contributing to his sense of self-awareness and later construction of adult identity, which will be seen to be monstrous.

**Reflection as an Image: the Monster’s Reflection**

Shelley also presents readers with the simplest sorts of reflection conceptually, those that are literally images “produced by or seen in a reflective surface” (OED), but from them evokes similarly complex elements of horror. One such instance is the pivotal scene in which the creature sees himself for the first time and, I would argue, actually becomes a monster.

It is not until the creature first sees his own reflection in a pool of water that his adult identity begins to form. According to Berk, self-awareness can be tested in infancy by whether the child is able to identify his or her own image in a mirror. This self-identification is necessary for self-awareness. “Self-awareness” being that which
“develops as infants and toddlers increasingly realize that their own actions cause objects and people to react in predictable ways” (Berk 158). The monster first self-identifies after spending a season observing cottagers who he describes as “beautiful.” His concept of “beautiful” precedes his concept of self. Because his appearance is nothing like that which he identifies with the beautiful, he expresses horror at the realization of his own reflection. In his reflection, the monster perceives something deplorable, and from this moment on he begins to identify with the kind of hatred his mirrored-image conveys. The linguistic logic in action here is the idea that, if love and beauty are linked, so must be hatred and ugliness. The monster sees his image and his identity therefore as an ugly being, hating and hated.

I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers – their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity. (Shelley 139)

The reader should feel at this point a foreshadowing of “the fatal effects” of the creature’s hideousness even had the creature not explicitly indicated toward them (139). According to Lacan, along with a the newfound sense of identification the child experiences in the mirror stage, there is a sense of inevitability, a pre-set destination bestowed upon the child through the image which will regulate the course of his or her life. He claims that the mirror stage can be understood “in this context as an identification, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect” (Lacan 95). The creature’s reaction of “despondence and mortification” (Shelley 139) signify not just his immediate reaction to the one image of himself, but the basic feeling that will forever be associated with all images and ideas he may have of himself. In this reflective moment, the creature truly becomes a monster, although it is the pre-determining quality of the mirrored image that seems to provide the foundation of monstrosity as it is presented and felt here.

Also of note here is Lacan’s idea that this initial image of the self takes into account not only the child’s figure, but also “the persons and even things around him” (Lacan 94). The creature describes the pool as transparent and it can be easily inferred, as Franco points out, that the bottom of it, which is not described, contains something. Franco speculates “rocks, mud, leaves, and assorted detritus” (Franco 90) is also included in the image. There is no comforting mother figure, only arbitrary, dead objects, which the creature thus incorporates into his identity, adding to his sense of himself as a miserable and misplaced monster.

This inevitable destiny of the creature as monster is not only monstrous in itself but horrifying in its implications for what is to occur in the future. Lacan claims, “This form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination,
in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible" (95). The monster, as ugly and hating identity, must commit ugly and hating deeds forever, despite any differing internal motivations. The power of simple perception of an outside image, namely a reflection, is appalling to any proponent of the idea that determination of action lies within rather than outside of the individual. The creature's experience confirms this terrific, hence terrifying, power. "Increase of knowledge," the creature laments of his new reflective power, "only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was. I cherished hope, it is true; but it vanished when I beheld my person reflected in water, or my shadow in the moon-shine, even as that frail image and that inconstant shade" (Shelley 156). The creature's identity is further confirmed by each image he encounters of himself and his actions which increasingly align with this image. The creature behaves as a monster and commits monstrous acts, murdering, manipulating, and enslaving his own creator, and readers look on with horror but not with surprise. Here it is the determining quality of mirrored images, images of the subject which arise outside the subject, which is truly horrifying.

Reflection as a Mental Process: the Newlyweds' Reflections

Now I would like to move on to an instance in the text in which reflection as "the action or process of thinking carefully or deeply about a particular subject, typically involving influence from one's past life or experience" (OED) is addressed and shown to contribute to the monstrous in this monster tale. This sort of reflection Shelley seems to hold up in comparison to the more image-driven kind in the scene in which Victor and Elizabeth, newlywed that morning, travel by boat to Evian, where they are to consummate their marriage.

"Those were the last moments of my life during which I enjoyed the feeling of happiness" (Shelley 215), Victor says, a kind of reflection in itself. He then describes the beauty of the scene reflected presently in the water: "Mont Saleve, the pleasant banks of Montalegre, and at a distance, surmounting all, the beautiful Mont Blanc." Surely the inclusion of Mont Blanc here is no accident; Shelley points toward the central theme in her husband's, Percy Shelley, poem "Mont Blanc": the way in which the human mind relates to, influences, and is influenced by perceptions of the world around it. At this particular moment, the surface reflection in the water is soothing to Victor, as it hints towards a different reality in which the monstrosity, he has not only witnessed but caused, does not exist. This reflection, which does not contain his reflected image, only sublime natural scenery, is still open to interpretation, and he is able to reflect favorably upon it.

Reflection upon the past mentally, however, produces reverse effects, adverse and condemning, at least in Victor's case. The past signifies a lack of power, a cause now outside of a subject's control yet one whose effects continue indefinitely. Reflecting on the past recreates through confirming its reality. Elizabeth seems as a character oddly aware of this aspect of reflection and its effect on the couple's mood, and, while melancholy herself
possibly through this awareness, attempts to cheer her husband, Victor, through pointing him toward the cheerier reflection, the one in the water which, though just a transient image, is a happy one.

Observe how fast we move along, and how the clouds which sometimes rise above the dome of Mont Blanc, render this scene of beauty still more interesting. Look also at the innumerable fish that are swimming in the clear waters, where we can distinguish every pebble that lies at the bottom. What a divine day! How happy and serene all nature appears!

Thus Elizabeth endeavored to divert her thoughts and mine from all reflection upon melancholy subjects. (Shelley 216)

The last moments of Victor's happiness end when the couple reaches the shore. The pleasant image in the lake is no longer visible and Victor returns to the mental reflections on his "cares and fears" which will "cling" to him “for ever” (Shelley 216). Something interesting occurs immediately before the couple reaches the shore though. There is a further merger of the visual image of reflection and its properties as a mental activity. Victor considers but does not comment further on the fact that in the image he perceives of the mountains and the water, reality is reversed: “The Alps here come closer to the lake, and we approached the amphitheatre of mountains which forms its eastern boundary. The spire of Evian shone under the woods that surrounded it, and the range of mountain above mountain by which it was overhung” (Shelley 216). In describing the spire, or mountaintop, shining “under the woods,” there is a visual top to bottom reversal, an inversion (216).

A similar inversion, as suggested by this passage’s relation to the mental process of reflection, is entirely plausible within the mind. Mental reflection, again, is “implying an ensuing change or reversal of opinion” (OED). The subject matter of reflection seems to hold less significance than the implications of the process. The subject matter also is almost always placed outside of the subject reflecting. It is impossible to reflect on entirely internal events. What is perhaps most uncomfortable in this is that internal personal reflections, usually considered under the agency of the one reflecting, are shown to be, again, powerful forces outside of the subject. There is something potentially horrific in the intermingling of the external and the internal; reflection can act as a contaminant to consciousness, contributing heavily to mood and future action and thought processes. Again, the horrific quality here is a lack of agency where agency is typically assumed, removed from the subject and placed instead somewhere in an impersonal outside force.

**Reflection as a Rule:**

**the Consequences of Reflection**

In addition to the startling quality of the monstrous mirrors themselves, Shelley may attempt to stir the reader with the sheer number of them presented, intertwined with all that may otherwise be mundane and unmoving. Mirrors and reflected images are everywhere in the text, distorting and reflecting off each other, leaving the observer puzzled as to which of a set is the original object and which its replicated image. Characters act as
mirrors, and in doing so take on roles of subject, mediator, and reflected object at once. Perceptions marked by assumed likeness construct fragile and restrictive realities, which shatter when these likenesses defy the subject’s expectations or desires. In writing *Frankenstein* Shelley has created a house of mirrors. In reading *Frankenstein* it is necessary to reflect upon the meaning and effects of these reflections, both as they relate to events in the story and how they may bear significance to the modern reader.

I have commented on the monstrous nature of three moments revolving around reflection within Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and attempted to demonstrate how each manipulates the concept of reflection in distinct yet similarly horrifying ways. In shattering identity, determining identity, and weighing heavily on the mental states of its subjects, reflection is horrifying in this text in all instances because it is something outside and other. It is a cause whose effect on the subject (and the subject’s affect) which the subject possesses no control over. It is an order, though it is not clear if this order is natural. It is confusion, an assault on expectations. Its determining power is godlike, yet it lacks motivation, benevolent or malicious. It is arbitrary in its course-setting. It is perhaps only felt as horrific when the course is set in a fatal direction, as is the case in the novel, which many have read as a series of rippling reflections, from some of the small textual instances I’ve pointed out to the structure of the novel as a whole. The end of the story mirrors its beginning in a way that is horrifying, yet due to the horror of reflections, not shocking in the least.

The shutters had been thrown back; and, with a sensation of horror not to be described, I saw at the open window a figure the most hideous and abhorred. A grin was on the face of the monster; he seemed to jeer, as with his fiendish finger he pointed towards the corpse of my wife. I rushed towards the window, and drawing a pistol from my bosom, shot; but he eluded me, leaped from his station, and, running with the swiftness of lightening, plunged into the lake. (Shelley 136)

This mirror brings full-circle what was set in motion at the moment of the creature’s birth, when Victor’s identity becomes intertwined with the monstrous. The interpretation of the initial image proves more powerful than the will of that image’s creator. The monster affirms his domination of Victor through the murder of his bride. Reflection in this case proves fatal and unpreventable. In the moment of the creature’s birth, this death occurred. This death was a necessity whose only clear cause was the logic of reflection. Our reaction to this death, the pinnacle point of horror and monstrosity in the novel, is then a reaction to the way Shelley has darkly defined and employed reflection.

What is Shelley finally trying to convey through this chaos of mirrors and reflected images, the divergence of the duplication from its source, these reflections on the properties of different sorts of reflections? Shelley’s mirrors show us our identities and destinies depend heavily upon objects and images, reflections that arise from sources outside ourselves, sometimes arbitrary ones. It is in points
of reflection, ruminations on these images, that the mind forms concepts and identities. The process of reflection is a determining process, a cause in itself with the power to set chains of events in motion. The power of the process of reflection renders us the invert of this great power, powerless. Yet in the production of this text, a work of individual will, a creation springing from within, it seems Shelley has defied herself, or more probably added further complication to what is implied concerning the power of reflection.

If reflections and mirrored images, one subset of these being artistic representations, have the power to both deconstruct and form identity and order, potentially horrific order, Shelley’s work can also be read as a warning to anyone creating such representations, or rather a reminder of the significance of such work. Her “hideous progeny,” as representation itself, delineates the monstrous through replication gone awry. Perhaps in confronting the monstrous in the mind through the monster in the mirror in this text, Shelley has succeeded in burying some monsters of her own mind. Yet in doing so she has created a “progeny” that is no longer hers alone. In revealing these possibly terrifying yet natural effects of reflection, Shelley raises a fundamental question regarding the readers’ own interaction with the text and any other form of representation: just what is being read and by whom?

Works Cited


