



“Just as Victor and the Monster had a tragic flaw that doomed them from the very beginning, so government schools have always been tragically flawed.”

The Making of a Monster: *Frankenstein*, Transgenderism, and Government Education¹



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I. Monsters of Free Love

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley (1797–1850), author of *Frankenstein* (1818), was the daughter of two revolutions, the French Revolution and the first Feminist one. History credits her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, as the founder of western feminism. A journalist by profession and the author of both *The Vindication of the Rights of Man* and *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft became the live-in lover of radical political justice philosopher William Godwin after the revolution. Welcomed into their intellectual and literary circle were notables such as Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, philosopher Thomas Paine, inventor Benjamin Franklin, and politician Aaron Burr. Eschewing marriage as enforced female slavery, Godwin and Wollstonecraft cohabitated and only consented to marriage just before their daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, was to be born, so as not to render this baby a bastard. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died eleven days after giving birth because the attending physician did not wash his hands. Thus began Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin's inconsolably melancholy life.²

After Mary Wollstonecraft died, William Godwin married Mary Jane Claremont, a harried woman characterized by biographers as both resourceful and impatient. Young Mary lived with her older half-sister Fanny Imlay (from Mary Wollstonecraft's previous relationship with a soldier) and younger sister, Claire. Mary met Percy Shelley when she was a young teen, and he was an older, married man of 19. Percy Shelley became William Godwin's disciple and patron. He eventually abandoned his pregnant wife, Harriet, moved in with Godwin and the girls, and ran off with Mary and Claire, having first courted Mary at her dead mother's grave and later having a sexual relationship with both sisters. Percy, Mary, and Claire met up with Lord Byron and Byron's personal nurse

John Polderi, and everywhere they traveled, they were known and despised as an “incest league.” If the sexual “freedom” that William Godwin once extolled horrified his peers, the boundaries that his daughters now pushed flagrantly offended him. Such goes the inconsistent morality of a sexual warrior.

As a model of these next-generation sexual revolutionaries, perhaps it goes without saying that Percy advocated for the emerging vision of feminism too. The archetypal feminist man, he was a proponent of free love, communal living, and the right for a woman to choose her lovers and initiate sexual contact outside of marriage. Percy died in a boating accident, and when his body washed up on shore, Mary requested that his heart be cut out so that she could have it always. Some historians believe she slept with it under her pillow. Eventually, this decrepit wafer of flesh found its resting place between pages of *Adonais*, one of Percy's last books of poetry, where it was discovered two years after Mary's own death in 1852.

It may come as no surprise that death always seemed mingled with their creative work. One finds a trail of blood following in their wake wherever they went. In 1815, Mary gave birth to a baby girl who died shortly after delivery. In 1816, Percy's legitimate wife Harriet committed a double suicide, drowning herself and her unborn child in the Serpentine River (thus leaving one child dead and two children orphaned, since Percy's atheism had then rendered him an unfit father in the eyes of the law). That same year, Fanny Imlay, Mary's half-sister, also committed suicide in the Serpentine. A year later, Claire gave birth to a baby girl named Allegra, whom she surrendered to the father, Lord Byron, when Byron decided that he despised her. It was during this time that Mary Shelly wrote her famous novel, *Frankenstein*. Abandon now any longing to sentimentalize the past as an idyllic world, only recently ejected from Eden

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1. A version of this paper was delivered as a Plenary talk at the Repairing the Ruins Conference, Association of Classical Christian Schools, Dallas, TX, June 2021.

2. See Marilyn Gaull, *English Romanticism: The Human Context*. New York: WW Norton & Company, 1988: 247-249.



when prayer was driven out of government schools in the 1960s. No, Mary Shelley's life and her monsters of "free love" remind us that evil is not only a modern problem.³

II. Fated for Destruction

Frankenstein is a gothic novel and is considered the founding literary work of the horror mode. The story has three narrators and uses the literary device of frame narrative, which legitimizes the strange and supernatural tale it contains by positioning the most logical and reliable narrator as the one who bookends the fiendish tale. It tells the story of a student of natural philosophy, Victor Frankenstein, who rejects the provincial expectations of his professors and instead works himself into madness by creating life out of body parts he desecrates and steals from graveyards. He is delirious with lust over the idea of creating something that will render him a god to be worshiped. But when he succeeds in bringing the Monster to life, he despises and rejects it with a fury twice that of the lust that fueled his rewriting of God's creation ordinance. He banishes his Monster, collapses in sickness and guilt, but is later nursed back to health by his childhood friend Henry Clerval. When a letter from his father reports that his brother William had been strangled and that their loyal housekeeper was now on trial for his murder, Victor feels a deep foreboding that the Monster he unleashed (and hasn't seen now for years) is responsible. Victor knows this information could spare Justine's execution and false conviction. He knows his silence condemns Justine to execution, but his pride outweighs his guilt, and he passively watches her execution, all the while knowing the blood is on his hands. Trying to flee from his responsibility, he travels to Geneva.

At Geneva, he meets his Monster again. At this point in the novel, the third narration takes place. This one features the Monster telling Victor his story of how he came of age, how he understands his origin and destiny, how he learned to read and speak, and what his creational worldview is. The Monster deeply wants to tell his tale in the style of *Bildungsroman*, but he can never achieve the optimism or dodge the doom of being one of this novel's tragic heroes. Because his creation was wrong from its inception, he is fated for destruction. The Monster's narrative frame carries hefty worldview weight, made clear by the novel's

epigraph, taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay to mold me man? Did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me?" (Book X, 743-745)⁴. This epigraph stands as a beacon for the Monster's classical reading list, which includes Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Johann Wolfgang Goethe's 1774 epistolary suicide novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. The Monster's hope is that he can read his way into humanity. Through good books, the Monster learns to cast his murderous rampages in Rousseauian light. Like Goethe's Werther, he feels himself a victim despite all the evidence that condemns him as the perpetrator. Victor has his reasons, and so does the Monster. He murders because he was rejected. It wasn't his fault.

Frankenstein's Monster has symbolized any number of modern horrors, from the dangers of having a bachelor creating life in a laboratory to the botched surgeries of transgenderism. Whenever someone violently tries to make something good out of some atheistic desire contrary to the Good, it is always a tragedy.

The Monster learns to speak and read by watching others, usually through holes in boards or windows in the dark of night. Indeed, the Monster is always on the outside looking in. After learning to read, he serendipitously finds in his jacket pocket Victor's journal that recounted his hideous origin. Sickened by his birth story and repulsed by his reflection in a pool, he desperately tries to make friends. Each rejection is more painful and more violent than the previous one. Confessing the murder of William and the framing of Justine for that murder, the Monster demands that Victor make him a wife. He wants someone like him. He wants someone who is similarly trapped and cannot reject him. Because Victor has already violated the Creation Ordinance

3. See Miranda Seymour, *Mary Shelley*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2000, and Janet Todd, ed., *A Wollstonecraft Anthology*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

4. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1674). Edited by Rebekah Merkle. Moscow, ID: Logos Press, 2015.



by creating the Monster, he feels compelled to make the Monster a wife. It's difficult not to see Victor as the prototype of the modern man for whom gay marriage looks like a good and sensible solution. Victor is a pluralist.

But this second time, as Victor is back in the laboratory making another monster, he no longer has lustful delusions of being the worshiped idol of this new race. Victor knows that his creation will reject him and that there is nothing in this for him. Filled with rage at this attack on his pride, Victor viciously rips the Monster's bride apart with his bare hands and dumps her lifeless and dismembered body in the sea. The Monster, who always seems to lurk behind a window, door, or tree, sees the whole thing in plain view and plots revenge. He tells Victor that he will see him on his wedding night. Victor flees to Ireland, where the body of Henry Clerval washes up the strand, and Victor is held on suspicion of his murder. Eventually found innocent, Victor condescends to marry Elizabeth, who becomes the next of the Monster's victims on her wedding night. (I know. Who saw that one coming?)

The Monster has killed everything Victor loved. With nothing left to live for, Victor becomes like his Creature. Isolated. Rejected. He decides he must hunt down and kill the Monster. He pursues the Monster through Europe and Russia and finally ends up in the Arctic Tundra, the Monster always eluding him. Lest the reader forget this is a frame narrative, this point in the story marks the end of Victor's narration. With a boat stuck on the ice in the middle of the frozen tundra, Victor finishes his tale and dies. It is here that the bookend narrator, Robert Walton, picks up the narrative thread. Robert is a reasonable guy. When the Monster appears at the window—always on the outside looking in—Robert calls on him to stay. Never before had anyone called him to come inside. So touched by the gesture, the Monster falls apart. His grief and remorse are profound. Without a battle of wills with his creator, the Monster has nothing to live for. He leaves—returns to the outside—to take his own life.

III. I, the Miserable and Abandoned

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someone violently tries to make something good out of some atheistic desire contrary to the Good, it is always a tragedy, and Frankenstein's Monster has symbolized this for over 200 years. The novel's two protagonists—the Atheist Creator and the Monster—are tragic heroes, who suffer deeply because of the combination of pride, the malicious actions of others, and the supernatural powers that contravene. This is partly the meaning of Mary Shelley's allusion to the "Modern Prometheus" in the book's subtitle. Like all tragic heroes, Victor and the Monster embody a recognizable worldview—in this case, a dark romanticism. But what were the tragic flaws that Victor and the Monster embodied? What does this mean for the classical teacher, and how can we recognize the tragic flaws afflicting our society today?

The first tragic flaw was The Empathy Problem. The first narrator, who inhabits the outer literary frame, is Robert Walton, a reckless explorer in the Arctic tundra who writes letters to his civilized sister back in England and dreams of finding a friend who can empathize with his passion for breaking all of the rules for the glory of discovering new lands. The operative word here is "empathize." Both the protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, and the frame narrator, Robert Walton, desire empathy, not sympathy. It's important for the classical Christian educator to recognize the difference. Sympathy acknowledges the truth of suffering and acts with compassion. The sympathizer can offer care and help "with suffering," as the literal meaning of the word suggests. In contrast, empathy puts emotion just beyond the reach of moral judgment and registers all suffering in the experiential terms of the listener, who offers nothing apart from the existential hope that misery in company is somehow less miserable (which it's not). Empathy, a relatively new word, means "to suffer in." Robert is the only character who learns the value of sympathy and thus is the only character who learns from the tragic hero's fatal flaw of desiring empathy over sympathy.⁵

The second tragic flaw was The Origin Problem. Victor Frankenstein makes a horrible Creator because his creation was a revolutionary rejection of the historic Christian faith. Victor wants to replace God and cares nothing about God's perfect design for humanity, which clearly demonstrates his Promethean idolatry:

5. Joe Rigney, "Do You Feel My Pain? Empathy, Sympathy, and Dangerous Virtues." *Desiring God*, May 2, 2020. Accessed December 13, 2022. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/do-you-feel-my-pain>



A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. (49)⁶

Adding insult to injury, his act of creation is arbitrary and careless. He didn't even bother to collect enough skin to cover the Creature's internal organs, an oversight that he didn't attend to until the Monster came to life:

I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs....His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath. (52)

As an atheist god, Victor has nothing to give his creation but sin and misery. The Monster is denied the *Imago Dei*. When the Creature gives his final soliloquy before his suicide, he says, "I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on. Even now my blood boils at the recollection of this injustice" (219). This ranks as the most intriguing coming-of-age line in Western literature, and the only one where the word abortion is used as a present-tense term of identity. And why does the Creature feel that he is—ontologically speaking—an abortion? Because the God of the universe did not make him in His image. In Mary Shelley's world, human creation is a violent act of expulsion, which only moves a person into further isolation, where survival depends on self-invention.

The third tragic flaw of the protagonists is the Epistemological Problem. Mary Shelley was both a product of and a proponent of literary romanticism, a worldview of the 18th century that valued feelings and emotions as central to finding and telling the truth. In romanticism, emotions are epistemological; from this posture is born the postmodern idea of "my truth" or "your truth." Truth in romanticism lurks within, only unearthed and legitimized by the empathy and affirmation of another. This romantic epistemology foregrounds Victor's worldview. "No sooner did that idea cross my imagination," he says, "than I became convinced of its truth....The mere presence of the idea was an irresistible proof of the fact" (71). Facts are not observable but rather internal intuitions that take shape because of the empathy and affirmation of

someone else. If union with Christ is not your identity, then your identity will demand affirmation from some outside source.

IV: Educational Franksteins in the Business of Monster-Making

Consider an allegorical interpretation. Government Schools in the US are not unlike Frankenstein's Monster, and they have always been so. In today's post-Obergefell,⁷ post-Bostock,⁸ and post-Respect for Marriage Act⁹ world, Government schools are the primary engine advancing LGBTQ+ politics and the dangerously false redefinition of personhood. In her groundbreaking book, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, Wall Street Journal writer Abigail Shrier recounts a letter that she received from the program coordinator for the Los Angeles Unified School District.¹⁰ The letter read:

Dear Mx. Shrier,

The role of schools has changed...Technically, we are an educational institution. But schools have expanded to be the hub for a lot more social searches and looking more holistically and emotionally at what's going on with children. Looking at schools as a source of social justice, our role continues to expand, and the outreach now is profound. (61)

Shrier further explains,

In June 2019, the policy-making arm of the California Teachers Association (CTA) met in Los Angeles at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel. On the agenda was a new business item...This was a proposal to allow trans-identified minor students (ages 12 and up) to leave campus during school hours to obtain gender hormone treatments without parental permission (59).

This is now the law of the land. Because gender ideology (transgender support and LGBTQ+ affirmation) is not part of sex education but rather mainstreamed into anti-bullying measures in public schools, parents who put their children in government schools cannot exempt them from this indoctrination. And, Shrier asks, "who are the bullies from whom our children must be protected? They go by 'mom' and 'dad' (77).

6. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Ed. James Reiger. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

7. Obergefell v Hodges, Supreme Court case which extended the right to marry to same-sex couples in 2015.

8. Bostock v Clayton, Supreme Court case which extended Civil Rights to the LGBTQ+ spectrum in 2020.

9. The Orwellian codification of gay "marriage" signed into federal law by President Joe Biden on December 13, 2022.

10. Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*. Washington, DC: Regnery Press, 2020.



The last chapter of her book is entitled “The Way Back.” The way back for children whose government school sponsored LGBTQ+ indoctrination has grafted them into this Frankensteinian self-mutilating cult is to remove the child from the school. Shrier is not a Christian. Nor is she against government school. But she is raising a clarion call for parents. And she points out that this cultish anti-parent LGBTQ+ affirming culture is in the posh private schools, too.

Just as Victor and the Monster had a tragic flaw that doomed them from the very beginning, so government schools have always been tragically flawed. The biggest problems in government school are not the LGBTQ+ takeover. That is merely the outworking and symptom of its tragic flaw. The biggest tragic flaw is that government schools have violated God’s order for the government of the family:

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart; And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou fittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou rises up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand and they shall be as frontlet between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house and on thy gates.
(Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

The problem with Government education is not merely that prayer is prohibited or that drag queens are commended. The problem is that government schools were born as a rejection of the historic Christian faith and as a usurpation of the biblical government of the family. Government schools carry with them the same tragic flaws that we rehearsed in *Frankenstein*: the empathy problem, the origin problem, and the epistemology problem. Monsters and the egomaniacs who create them leave a wake of death and destruction behind them. Lest we forget, Frankenstein was born of the romantic movement in England, a movement that elevated emotions and feelings to the level of epistemological integrity. Today, we bear out these scars in the form of “expressive individualism,” the idea that emotions are as much an integrated truth as an arm or a leg would be.¹¹ Today,

failing to affirm someone’s emotional truth is equivalent to a violent amputation of their personhood.

Today we are hearing a growing concern with government schools, and voices are rising from within and from without Christian churches, families, and organizations. All of this leads to some essential questions: are we who teach in Christian Classical education ready to aid the war refugees from government schools that we will see emerge in the coming years? Are we ready to help fellow Christians get out of Government schools? For those who are tasked with building and guarding the culture of their classical Christian schools, how should administrators guide and help parents wrestling with these issues? And what is our assignment from God as Classical Christian teachers? What is our responsibility to Christian parents who place their covenant children in government schools because they currently don’t have any other good options? In response, I believe that we have four assignments:

1. We need to speak the whole biblical truth on the matter: no Christian child should have to go to a government school.
2. We need to make room for more students. Administrators must do this wisely, with a variety of creative means that support and educate parents as well as students.
3. We need to work with our churches and schools to provide funding for Christian families who need help.
4. We need to train Classical Christian teachers who love the Lord Jesus Christ and who love and incarnate the wisdom, virtue, knowledge, rigor, and light that the Bible calls us to embody.

This is our moment. Let us resolve to do our work well and to open our arms wide to include those who do not yet know the delight of Christian Classical education. Unless we learn how to help Christian families caught in government schools, the future of our social order will resemble Frankenstein’s soulless monster: barren, self-destructive, and hell-bent.



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11. Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publications, 2020: 79-80.