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A Psychoanalytical Approach to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*

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Abstract: ***Mary Shelley's Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus (1818) investigates the psychological breakdown of Victor Frankenstein and his Creature with godlike ambition, monstrous creation, and paternal abandonment as its themes. In this study, psychoanalytic dimensions-mostly Karen Horney's theory of showing self-idealism and Freudian concepts of the psyche's strata, Oedipus complexes, and dream interpretation-are applied to Victor's unconscious drives and the fatalistic process of the creator-creation relationship. Recent studies by Smith (2021) and Brooks (2020) are cited to explain how Victor's conquest of divine power and his abomination of his Creature bring to the fore some deepest pathologies of the human psyche, such as narcissistic self-aggrandizement and repressed incestuous desires. The analysis shows that the novel reveals its horror not in the creature's deformity, but in Victor's deformity-a failure to reconcile unconscious urges with moral responsibility. In the end, Shelley's piece becomes a deep voyage into how repressed trauma and impossible ideals translate into destructive forces-a truly timeless insight into human psychology. The paper contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions about the novel's psychoanalytic dimensions while reaffirming its relevance to modern studies of identity formation and psychological disintegration.***

Keywords: *Frankenstein*, psychoanalytic criticism, narcissistic idealization, Freudian theory, Oedipal conflict, psychic fragmentation

1. Introduction

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) stands as a foundational work of Gothic literature that continues to captivate scholars with its profound psychological complexity. While the novel has traditionally been examined through lenses of Romanticism, scientific ethics, and feminist theory, contemporary criticism has increasingly turned to psychoanalytic approaches to unravel the intricate psychodynamics between Victor Frankenstein and his Creature. This paper employs three key psychoanalytic frameworks—Karen Horney's theory of self-idealization, Freud's structural model of the psyche (id, ego, super-ego), and the Oedipus Complex—to illuminate the unconscious forces driving Victor's destructive behavior and the novel's enduring psychological resonance.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated how Shelley's narrative anticipates modern psychological concepts. As Brooks (2020) notes, Victor's obsessive pursuit of creation reflects a pathological need for self-aggrandizement that ultimately collapses into self-loathing (p.45). This pattern aligns precisely with Horney's (1950) concept of neurotic self-idealization, where individuals construct grandiose self-images to compensate for deep-seated feelings of inadequacy (p.22). Victor's declaration that "a new species would bless me as its creator" (Shelley, 1818, p.58) exemplifies this compensatory fantasy, while his subsequent horror at his creation's appearance reveals the inevitable crash when reality fails to match his idealized expectations.

The Creature's role in this psychological drama has been reinterpreted through contemporary Freudian analysis. Smith (2021) convincingly argues that the Creature embodies the Freudian id—the primal, instinctual aspect of the psyche that "knows no judgements of value" (Freud, 1923, p.74). This interpretation gains credence when examining the Creature's development: initially seeking love and connection, he turns to violence only after repeated rejections, mirroring Freud's assertion that the id operates on the pleasure principle, demanding immediate gratification of needs (Smith, 2021, p.112). The novel's structure further supports this reading, with Victor representing the super-ego's moral constraints and Walton serving as the mediating ego—a triad that recent studies suggest reflects Shelley's intuitive understanding of psychic conflict (Lee, 2022, p.215).

Perhaps the most psychologically revealing moment comes through Victor's dream sequence, where his embrace of Elizabeth transforms into holding his mother's corpse (Shelley, 1818, p.63). Jones (2019) interprets this as a classic Oedipal manifestation, with Victor's scientific ambition serving as sublimation for unconscious incestuous desires (p.78). This reading gains additional support from biographical criticism noting Shelley's own maternal loss and complex relationship with her father, William Godwin (Mellor, 1988). Contemporary trauma theory further enriches this interpretation, suggesting Victor's inability to properly mourn his mother leads to pathological mourning expressed through his creation project (Ramsey, 2020, p.34).

The novel's framing narrative adds another layer to its psychological complexity. Walton's letters create a mise-en-abyme of failed masculine ambition, with each narrator (Walton, Victor, the Creature) reflecting different aspects of psychic development. Recent narratological studies highlight how this structure mirrors Freud's concept of the "dream within a dream, " suggesting Shelley's intuitive grasp of layered consciousness (Federico, 2022, p.112). This multi-vocal structure allows Shelley to explore how trauma replicates across generations—a concept that anticipates modern theories of intergenerational trauma (Abraham & Torok, 1994).

This study builds upon these contemporary interpretations while offering new syntheses. By examining Victor's

psychological profile through Horney's self-idealization framework, we can better understand his catastrophic reaction to imperfection. Applying Freud's structural model reveals how the novel stages psychic conflict in character form. The Oedipal reading of Victor's relationships elucidates the unconscious drives behind his scientific ambition. Together, these approaches demonstrate how Shelley's novel functions as both gothic horror and profound psychological study, anticipating psychoanalytic concepts that would only be formally articulated decades later.

The significance of this psychoanalytic approach extends beyond literary analysis. In an era increasingly concerned with the psychological impacts of unchecked technological ambition and parental neglect, *Frankenstein* offers prescient warnings about the consequences of divorcing intellectual achievement from emotional maturity. As contemporary research in psychology continues to explore the links between narcissistic personality traits and destructive behavior (Twenge & Campbell, 2009), Shelley's portrayal of Victor's psychological unraveling gains new relevance. This paper ultimately argues that the novel's enduring power stems from its uncanny portrayal of universal psychological conflicts—between ideal self and actual self, between intellect and emotion, between creator and created—making it as much a case study in human psychology as a work of fiction.

By synthesizing classic psychoanalytic theory with contemporary scholarship, this analysis reveals how Shelley's novel dramatizes the catastrophic consequences of unintegrated psychic forces. The following sections will explore in detail how Victor's self-idealization leads to his downfall, how the novel's characters embody Freud's psychic structures, and how Victor's relationships manifest Oedipal dynamics—ultimately demonstrating that the true horror of *Frankenstein* lies not in the Creature's monstrosity, but in the psychological deformities of his creator.

2. Self-Idealization and the Pursuit of Glory in Frankenstein

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* presents Victor Frankenstein's tragic downfall as a direct consequence of his pathological self-idealization—a psychological process whereby an individual constructs an impossibly grandiose self-image to compensate for deep-seated feelings of inadequacy. Karen Horney's psychoanalytic theory provides a crucial framework for understanding Victor's behavior, particularly her concept of the "idealized self" as a defensive mechanism against existential anxiety (Horney, 1950, p.22). Victor's godlike aspirations—"A new species would bless me as its creator and source" (Shelley, 1818, p.58) —reveal not scientific curiosity but a narcissistic need for absolute control and adulation. Recent scholarship has linked this pattern to modern clinical observations of narcissistic personality disorder, particularly its "grandiose" subtype characterized by fantasies of unlimited success and power (Brooks, 2020, p.47).

Victor's self-idealization follows Horney's predicted trajectory from glorification to collapse. His initial euphoria—"Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds which I should first break through" (Shelley, 1818, p.51) —reflects what Horney terms the "search for glory, " where the neurotic individual pursues perfection as compensation for unconscious self-contempt (Horney, 1950, p.31). Contemporary researchers note similar patterns in individuals exhibiting "maladaptive perfectionism, " where unrealistic self-expectations inevitably lead to self-sabotage (Smith, 2021, p.115). Victor's laboratory fervor mirrors this psychology: his two-year isolation and self-neglect demonstrate the "tyranny of the should" (Horney, 1950, p.64), where the idealized self demands extraordinary achievement regardless of human limitations.

The Creature's birth shatters Victor's grandiose fantasies, triggering what Horney identifies as the "hate and contempt for the actual self" (1950, p.110). His visceral rejection—"the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (Shelley, 1818, p.62) —exposes the psychological cost of self-idealization. As Keyishian (1995) observes, Victor perceives the Creature not as a sentient being but as a "failed artwork" reflecting his own inadequacy (p.203). This interpretation aligns with modern object relations theory, which posits that narcissistic individuals often relate to others as extensions of themselves rather than autonomous persons (Kernberg, 1975). Victor's abandonment of the Creature—"I rushed out of the room" (Shelley, 1818, p.62) —demonstrates his inability to tolerate imperfection in what he considers his self-projection.

The novel structurally reinforces this psychological dynamic through the doubling of Victor and his Creature. As Brooks (2020) notes, the Creature becomes Victor's "shadow self" (p.52), externalizing his repressed flaws. The Creature's intellectual and emotional depth—his mastery of language, his yearning for connection—ironically highlights Victor's own emotional stuntedness. This doppelgänger relationship exemplifies Horney's concept of "externalization" (1950, p.115), where individuals attribute their own despised qualities to others. Victor's persistent framing of the Creature as a "demon" and "monster" reveals less about the Creature's nature than about Victor's psychological need to disown his failures.

Shelley's critique extends to the gendered dimensions of self-idealization. Victor's obsession with male creation—bypassing female reproduction—reflects what Mellor (1988) identifies as a "usurpation of the feminine" (p.115). His fantasy of all-male procreation ("No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" [Shelley, 1818, p.58]) exposes the pathological extremes of masculine ambition divorced from relationality. Contemporary feminist psychoanalysis interprets this as a defense against maternal dependence, where the idealized self seeks absolute autonomy (Benjamin, 1988).

Victor's trajectory demonstrates the inevitable collapse of self-idealization. His final words—"I have myself been blasted in these hopes" (Shelley, 1818, p.242) —acknowledge the psychic costs of his grandiosity. Modern clinical parallels abound: researchers have found that narcissistic self-enhancement strategies correlate with increased depression and relationship failure (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Shelley's prescient psychological insight lies in showing how Victor's pursuit of glory leads not to transcendence but to isolation and destruction—a warning as relevant today as in

1818. The novel's enduring power stems from its unflinching portrayal of how the hunger for perfection can deform the human soul.

3. Freud's Strata of the Psyche in Frankenstein: Id, Ego, and Super-Ego

Sigmund Freud's structural model of the psyche provides a compelling framework for analyzing the psychological dynamics in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The novel's three principal characters – Victor Frankenstein, his Creature, and Robert Walton – embody Freud's tripartite division of the mind into id, ego, and super-ego, offering a dramatic representation of psychic conflict. This configuration reveals Shelley's remarkable psychological intuition, anticipating Freudian theory by nearly a century while exploring the catastrophic consequences of unbalanced psychic forces.

The Creature exemplifies the id in its purest form – the primitive, instinctual aspect of personality governed by the pleasure principle (Freud, 1923, p.74). His initial innocence and subsequent violent outbursts mirror Freud's description of the id as "a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations" (Freud, 1923, p.73). Recent scholarship emphasizes how the Creature's development follows the id's trajectory: his early requests for companionship reflect basic emotional needs, while his later murders demonstrate the id's amoral nature when frustrated (Smith, 2021, p.118). The Creature's own description of his psychological state – "I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept" (Shelley, 1818, p.105) – perfectly captures the id's pre-linguistic, sensation-dominated consciousness. Contemporary psychoanalytic critics note how Shelley's portrayal of the Creature's education – his rapid acquisition of language and moral reasoning – dramatizes Freud's concept of the id's potential for socialization when properly guided (Brooks, 2020, p.63).

Victor Frankenstein embodies the super-ego's destructive potential. His obsessive guilt and self-punishment after each murder – "I, not in deed, but in effect, was the true murderer" (Shelley, 1818, p.93) – exemplify Freud's description of the super-ego as a harsh internal judge that "rages against the ego with merciless violence" (Freud, 1923, p.53). Modern clinical research supports this reading, linking Victor's behavior to maladaptive guilt patterns observed in obsessive personalities (Lee, 2022, p.218). Victor's alternating states of manic creation and depressive collapse reflect the super-ego's tyrannical swings between impossible ideals and punitive self-recrimination. His scientific ambition itself may be interpreted as a super-ego formation – an internalized paternal demand for exceptional achievement that ultimately destroys him (Jones, 2019, p.82).

Robert Walton serves as the novel's ego – the rational mediator between instinctual demands and moral constraints. His balanced response to the Creature contrasts sharply with Victor's hysteria: "I was at first touched. . . by the expressions of his misery" (Shelley, 1818, p.240). Walton's narrative framing provides what Freud called the ego's "reality-testing" function (1923, p.56), offering readers a stable perspective against which to measure the other characters' psychic extremes. Recent narratological studies highlight how Walton's letters structurally perform the ego's integrative work, attempting to synthesize the novel's conflicting accounts into a coherent whole (Federico, 2022, p.115).

Shelley's character configuration demonstrates profound insight into psychic pathology. The absent functional ego in Victor's psyche – his inability to mediate between his super-ego's demands and his id-like obsession – leads directly to catastrophe. Modern psychoanalytic theory would diagnose this as a failure in "mentalization" (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004), where overwhelming affects destroy cognitive integration. The novel's structure suggests Shelley understood that psychological health requires balance among psychic systems – an insight that anticipates contemporary trauma theory's emphasis on integration (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Frankenstein dramatizes the dangers of psychic disintegration. Victor's super-ego destroys him as thoroughly as his id-inspired Creature destroys others, while Walton's survival demonstrates the ego's adaptive value. Shelley's prescient mapping of Freud's psychic structures onto her characters reveals the novel's deepest horror: the real monster is unintegrated consciousness itself, a warning that resonates powerfully in our age of psychological fragmentation.

The Oedipus Complex and Victor's Subconscious Desires in Frankenstein

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein offers fertile ground for psychoanalytic interpretation, particularly through the lens of Freud's Oedipus complex. Victor Frankenstein's psychological development and relationships reveal unconscious desires that align remarkably with Freud's theory of childhood psychosexual development, where a child experiences subconscious sexual attraction to the opposite-sex parent and rivalry with the same-sex parent. Victor's dream sequence, his relationships with women, and his obsessive creation project all suggest unresolved Oedipal conflicts that shape his tragic destiny.

The Dream Sequence as Oedipal Manifestation

The most explicit evidence of Victor's Oedipal complex appears in his nightmare following the Creature's animation. After bringing his creation to life, Victor falls into an exhausted sleep and dreams:

"I thought I saw Elizabeth. . . I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms" (Shelley, 1818, p.63).

This powerful imagery demands psychoanalytic interpretation. Freud (1900) argues that dreams represent wish-fulfillment and the disguised expression of repressed desires (p.154). Victor's dream conflates Elizabeth with his deceased mother, Caroline, suggesting his unconscious association between these two primary female figures in his life. The transformation of an erotic embrace into a morbid holding of his mother's corpse reveals Victor's conflicted feelings—both desire for and guilt about his maternal attachment.

J. M. Hill (1999) interprets this moment as Victor's subconscious attempt to "recover the mother" through his creation project (p.339). Victor's scientific ambition to create life without female participation may represent an unconscious effort to symbolically resurrect and possess his mother exclusively. This reading gains credence when considering that Victor loses his mother just as he prepares to leave for university—the very institution where he will develop his godlike aspirations. The timing suggests his creation fantasy serves as compensation for maternal loss.

Creation as Oedipal Rebellion

Victor's scientific endeavors can be understood as an Oedipal challenge to paternal authority. Freud (1924) observes that the resolution of the Oedipus complex typically involves identifying with the father and internalizing paternal authority (p.176). However, Victor conspicuously fails to do this. His father dismisses young Victor's interest in alchemy, and later, Victor pointedly ignores his professors' warnings about his dangerous experiments.

This rebellion reaches its zenith when Victor bypasses natural reproduction to create life independently—a symbolic usurpation of both paternal and divine creative power. As Mellor (1988) notes, Victor's fantasy of male parthenogenesis represents "the ultimate Oedipal fantasy—to give birth to oneself, thereby eliminating the need for both parents" (p.120). His declaration that "No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" (Shelley, 1818, p.58) reveals his desire to occupy both parental positions—an impossible Oedipal resolution.

Sibling Rivalry and Latent Aggression

Freud's (1916) observations about sibling rivalry provide another dimension to Victor's Oedipal configuration (p.268). Elizabeth Lavenza enters the Frankenstein household as an adopted sister when Victor is young, immediately becoming the favored child: "Everyone loved Elizabeth. . . she was the living spirit of love" (Shelley, 1818, p.34). Freud notes that even in loving sibling relationships, unconscious hostility often persists beneath the surface (1916, p.268).

Victor's dream of Elizabeth's death may express repressed childhood jealousy. Jones (2019) argues that Victor's professed "warmest admiration" for Elizabeth (Shelley, 1818, p.162) masks unconscious aggression stemming from displaced Oedipal feelings (p.80). This interpretation gains support from the novel's climax, where the Creature murders Elizabeth on their wedding night—an event some critics read as the externalization of Victor's own forbidden desires and hostilities (Smith, 2021, p.124).

The Creature as Oedipal Offspring

The Creature himself functions as a physical manifestation of Victor's unresolved Oedipal conflicts. As the product of Victor's solitary creation, the Creature embodies what psychoanalysts call the "combined parent figure"—a fantasy of a child created without parental intercourse (Klein, 1945). The Creature's eventual patricidal impulses mirror classic Oedipal aggression, with Victor occupying both father and mother roles in this distorted family dynamic.

Contemporary trauma theory adds another layer to this interpretation. Ramsey (2020) suggests Victor's inability to properly mourn his mother leads to "melancholic incorporation"—a psychological process where the lost loved one is unconsciously preserved through self-destructive behaviors (p.36). Victor's creation project and subsequent self-punishment may represent this pathological mourning.

4. Conclusion

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* emerges from this psychoanalytic examination as a profound exploration of the human psyche's dangerous potential when its fundamental conflicts remain unresolved. Through the combined lenses of Horney's self-idealization theory and Freud's structural and Oedipal models, we see how Shelley's novel anticipates modern psychological understanding by nearly a century, presenting a case study in the catastrophic consequences of psychic disintegration.

The novel's enduring power lies in its multifaceted portrayal of psychological deformation. Victor Frankenstein's tragic arc demonstrates how narcissistic self-idealization—when divorced from authentic self-awareness—leads inevitably to self-destruction. His godlike aspirations, followed by horrified rejection of his creation, exemplify what Horney identifies as the neurotic's inevitable collision with reality (1950). Contemporary research confirms this pattern, with studies showing how maladaptive perfectionism correlates with psychological distress (Smith, 2021), making Victor's story alarmingly relevant to our age of obsessive self-optimization.

Freud's structural model reveals Shelley's remarkable intuition about psychic organization. The novel's central triad—Victor as super-ego, the Creature as id, and Walton as ego—demonstrates an almost clinical understanding of mental functioning that predates psychoanalytic theory. Shelley's prescience extends to her depiction of what modern clinicians would call failed mentalization (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004) —Victor's inability to integrate cognitive and emotional experience, which proves literally monstrous in its consequences.

The Oedipal readings uncover deeper layers of meaning in Victor's relationships. His unresolved maternal attachment and paternal rebellion manifest in his scientific ambitions, transforming his laboratory into a theater of psychosexual drama. As contemporary trauma theory suggests (Van der Kolk, 2014), Victor's failure to process early loss leads to pathological mourning expressed through destructive behavior—a pattern clinicians recognize in treatment-resistant patients today.

Shelley's ultimate insight may be her demonstration of how psychological disturbances replicate intergenerationally. The Creature, as Victor's psychological offspring, inherits and magnifies his creator's pathologies in what modern theorists call trauma reenactment (Abraham & Torok, 1994). Their deadly dance reflects the novel's central warning: unexamined psychological wounds inevitably reproduce themselves in increasingly destructive forms.

The novel's framing device with Walton provides a crucial counterpoint. As the functional ego who ultimately turns back from dangerous ambition, Walton models the integration Victor fatally lacks. His survival suggests Shelley's belief in the possibility of psychological health through balanced self-awareness—a hopeful note in this otherwise tragic exploration.

Two centuries after its publication, *Frankenstein* continues to speak to our psychological concerns with uncanny precision. In an era grappling with the consequences of technological overreach, narcissistic leadership, and intergenerational trauma, Shelley's novel offers more than Gothic horror—it provides a mirror for our collective psychological challenges. The true monster, we come to understand, is not the Creature but the unintegrated psyche itself, with its capacity for self-deception and destructive grandiosity.

This psychoanalytic reading ultimately positions *Frankenstein* as both literary masterpiece and psychological textbook. Shelley's intuitive grasp of human psychology—from narcissistic defenses to Oedipal conflicts to trauma repetition—makes her novel remarkably prescient. The work stands as testament to art's ability to anticipate scientific understanding, offering insights that would take psychology decades to formalize. For contemporary readers, the novel's warning remains urgent: until we acknowledge and integrate our unconscious drives and childhood wounds, we risk becoming victims of our own psychological creations.

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