Domesticity, Literacy, and Self in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on the influence of domesticity in Mary Shelley’s

_Frankenstein._ The motivation for this project comes from the theories of Gaston Bachelard in his book, _The Poetics of Space_. I study the domestic situation of the three narrators from

_Frankenstein:_ Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the creature. Additionally, I analyze each character’s household, as well as their isolation, in order to highlight the difference between belonging to a home and being homeless. Belonging to a household, and maintaining an attachment to home appears to be particular characters’ saving grace. On the other hand, and paradoxically, it seems that home drives characters away and into isolation or society. Each character demonstrates how their _home_ environment teaches them language, and language informs their self-identification. The result of this research is the realization that Mary Shelley’s most famous novel depicts how home informs identity.
Title:
Domesticity, Literacy, and Self in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

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I. Home as the Origin of Ideas and Identity

After listening to a particular philosophical discussion between her husband and Lord Byron, Mary Shelley became enthralled with a particular metaphysical concept. She clung to their discussion about “the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated” (Shelley 168). According to Mary Shelley, in the Introduction to Frankenstein, Third Edition (1831) (Shelley 165), it was her rumination over this inquiry that inspired the ghost story that led to her first and most famous novel, Frankenstein (1818). Lawrence Lipking claims, “An undisclosed secret, the principle of life, motivates all the action [in the novel], and Frankenstein’s lonely, obsessive quest spurs a competitive response in many lonely, obsessive readers who pursue, like him, the mystery of creation” (Lipking 417). I argue that Shelley presents home as the principle/source of life/creation throughout her novel, Frankenstein. In her essay, Objects as Meaning; or Narrating the Past, Susan M. Pearce uses the theories of Saussure (1973), Barthes (1977), and Leach (1976) as a platform for her semiotic examination of Lieutenant Henry Anderson’s red “waterloo jacket,” which is displayed in the National Army Museum in London. Pearce proclaims, “the jacket works as a message-bearing entity, acting in relationship to Waterloo both as an intrinsic sign and as a metaphorical symbol [of the battle]...objects are seen as one of several ways of narrating the past” (Pearce 20-1). I borrow Pearce’s theoretical lens to analyze Frankenstein in order to reveal how Shelley represents home as the signifier of characters’ pasts and identities. Each character’s past signifies the origination of their identity, and each identity develops differently due to their varying relationships to particular households.

Many biographers and theorists have intimated that Mary Shelley’s own domestic experiences served as inspiration for Frankenstein. In her biographical book, Mary Shelley: Her
Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters, Anne K. Mellor delves deep into the Mary Shelley’s home life. The first section, In Search of Family, describes the instability of Mary’s early childhood, including the death of her mother, her father’s struggles as a single parent, his frenzy to find a wife, and his detachment from his daughter after his marriage to Mary Jane Clairmont in December of 1801. Mellor emphasizes the abandonment Mary experienced as a child, which coincides with the desertion that each narrator from Frankenstein experiences. Louisa Jones, a friend of Godwin’s sister who had become like a mother to Mary, left the Godwin household when Mary was only three years old. Louisa’s departure only added to Mary’s sense of abandonment. Mellor claims that Louisa’s departure “deprived the little girl of the only mother she had ever known” (Mellor 5). Furthermore, Mellor’s analysis of Mary Shelley’s life shows how Shelley’s homeschool education is mirrored in each of her three narrators’ tales. Mellor claims that “Mary would often listen quietly in a corner while Godwin carried on political, philosophical, scientific, or literary conversations with such visitors as William Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, [and] Samuel Taylor Coleridge” (Mellor 11). The education Mary received from eavesdropping is depicted in the creature’s observation of the De Lacey household. Also, Walton and Victor’s access to volumes of influential books, mirrors Mary’s “access to her father’s excellent library of old English authors” (Mellor 11). Mellor’s account of Mary Shelley’s disjointed childhood gives plenty of examples from Mary’s home life that appear to have influenced her writing.

Shelley’s depiction of the makeshift Frankenstein family and the devoted De Lacey’s, for instance, demonstrates the essential function of home as it relates to a worthwhile existence. Additionally, Shelley suspends the procreative component of creation via images of incest, infertility, and motherlessness, as theorists such as Peter Brooks, Richard K. Sanderson and
Steven Lehman have indicated. Her displacement of the obvious source of life prompts readers to focus on other underlying causes of being, such as language and classification. Her depictions of domesticity reveal the educative quality of home environments, especially in regards to the acquisition of language. Moreover, she intellectualizes the creature despite his homeless and outcast existence, which indicates how the determination of individuality depends primarily on domesticity. The creature’s homelessness and unrecognizable physiognomy cause him to be classified by language as a dreaded “wretch.” In turn, his rejected character produces his orphanhood and isolation in the wilderness. *Frankenstein* consistently calls attention to the process by which domesticity provides definability and identifiability for household inhabitants.

The creature’s detached and isolated development characterizes an alternative to presumed notions of home. He resolves to “quit the neighborhood of man, and dwell, as it may chance, in the most savage of places” (Shelley 103). Nineteenth-century British novels, such as *Frankenstein*, “produced that welcome yet uncomfortable experience of immersion in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts” (Gettelman 295). Shelley’s depiction of the creature’s ambiguous, in-between, and outcast existence authenticates Gettelman’s summary of nineteenth-century literature. Furthermore, Shelley’s uncanny creature yearns for self-expression and individuality, which highlights the characteristics of the “Romantic Revolution” (Veidemanis 61) that happened in the background of Shelley’s era. Additionally, *Frankenstein* elucidates how “Romantic literature necessitates the active participation of the reader, who must attend closely to the workings of the artist’s (actually the persona’s) mind as it shapes and controls the work of art” (Schug 607). Specifically, Shelley compels readers to distinguish between domesticity and vagrancy, via her juxtaposition and conflation of companionless isolation and affectionate “domestic circles.” In doing so, Shelley validates Pearce’s opinion that, “the need to decipher
gives us the chance to bring out both what is in the object and what is in ourselves; it is a
dynamic, complex movement which unfolds as time passes, and in the act of interpretive
imagination we give form to ourselves” (Pearce 27). In other words, Shelley gives form to her
characters via readers’ interpretation of their domestic situation. The creature, for example, longs
for a family and home, like a foster child, but he’s never invited to stay in the homes he enters.
The consequence of his transient existence is permanent unrecognizability and exclusion. His
monstrous appearance causes his inability to belong anywhere but the wilderness. John Allen
comments on the effects of a transient upbringing, where one doesn’t know when, where or if
they’ll ever belong anywhere or with anyone. He claims, “foster care falls far short of providing
an ideal home situation for growing children. Almost by definition, it cannot provide the child
with an environment that leads to the formation of critical attachments to people and place,
which provide the foundation for normal development” (Allen 194). If we suspend Allen’s
specific subject, foster care, and just borrow his psychoanalysis of domestic displacement, then
we can apply his statement specifically to Victor Frankenstein’s creation. The creature’s lack of
domestic or familial attachments (“an ideal home”), results in his abnormal development and
displacement from society. As Allen argues, “Being without a home, with all its cognitive and
emotional trappings, is to be on the margins of society” (181). Shelley indicates the “cognitive
and emotional trappings” of home in her depictions of the Walton, Frankenstein and De Lacey
households. Conversely, her portrayal of the creature’s alienated existence represents how
homelessness causes social marginality.

II. Walton’s Way Home vs. Victor’s Severance from Home
From the first page of *Frankenstein* up to the last, Mary Shelley highlights the paradoxical connection between domesticity and domestic displacement. She starts her story with the conflicted sentiments of Robert Walton in a letter to his sister, Mrs. Saville. He is eager to continue his progression toward undiscovered landscapes, but he requests the consent of his sister, who represents the household he left behind. That she is a symbolic representation of domesticity is emphasized by the fact that she no longer shares the same last name as her brother, which implies that she’s married and maintains a household of her own. “[W]ith your leave, my sister, I will put some trust in preceding navigators… I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man (Shelley 7). Many theorists, such as Michelle Levy, have analyzed how *Frankenstein* represents “discovery as a threat to the domestic affections” (Levy 698). However, it’s equally significant to note how each character’s home, or lack thereof, represents the foundation from which they realize their ambitions and desires for individuality. Robert Walton, for example, despises the fact that he is “self-educated,” and that “the first fourteen years of [his] life… [he] read nothing but [his] uncle Thomas’s books of voyages” (Shelley 10). However, his recollections of childhood reveal the familial and household influences that led to his present aspirations. In his book, *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard argues, “In order to sense, across the years, our attachment for the house we were born in, dream is more powerful than thought… To inhabit oneirically the house we were born in means more than to inhabit it in memory; it means living in this house that is gone, the way we used to dream in it” (Bachelard 16). Walton verifies Bachelard’s theory by repeatedly revisiting his “neglected” childhood education, which took place in his uncle’s library. He demonstrates how the home he grew up in influenced his identity each time he reiterates how he studied “a history of all the voyages made
for purposes of discovery" (Shelley 8). Additionally, his “father’s dying injunction had forbidden
[his] uncle to allow [him] to embark in a sea-faring life” (Shelley 8). Therefore, between being
forbidden to think about, and becoming fascinated with sea-voyages, Walton’s household bred
him to assume his curious and adventurous lifestyle. As Levy points out, “Frankenstein self-
consciously reflect[s] on the power of tales of the unknown, paying particular attention to the
way such stories inspire imitation, both in the physical world and on the page” (Levy 695).
Walton clearly wishes to imitate the voyage narratives from the moment he set eyes on them, and
he mimics them in his expedition to the North Pole, as well as in his journal writings.

In the same imitative manner as Walton, Victor Frankenstein reveals that his identity is
the product of his emulation of Cornelius Agrippa’s ancient and “chimerical” science. Like
Walton, he discovers “a volume of works” (Shelley 22), which becomes the driving force of his
aspirations and identity. John B. Lamb claims, “It is important to note that Victor’s subsequent
creation of the monster and the birth of the ‘monstrous’ is precipitated by books, by language
itself” (Lamb 310). Interestingly, Victor does not discover the volume of Agrippa’s theories at
home. He recalls, “When I was thirteen years of age, we all went on a party of pleasure to the
baths near Thonon: the inclemency of the weather obliged us to remain a day confined to the inn.
In this house, I chanced to find a volume of the works of Cornelius Agrippa” (Shelley 22). Victor
discovers the stimulus of his existence away from home, which foreshadows his eventual
removal from, and deprivation of a home. Walton’s impulse to explore begins in the house he
considers home, which may be why he never completely forsakes his home like Victor does. In
addition to pointing out that his scientific aspirations started away from his home, Victor
acknowledges the alternate identities he could have pursued if his father (the personification of
his home) had warned him against the impractical theories of Agrippa. He goes as far as to say,
"It is even possible, that the train of my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin" (Shelley 22), if only his father had been more adamant and explanatory in his rejection of Agrippa. Victor’s accusatory attitude toward his father, as well as his notion that identity is pliable, implies the imperative function of home in relation to identity. Even though he begins his personal history with praises for his parents and his “domestic circle,” Victor emphasizes his indeterminate domestic situation when he blames the unfortunate circumstances of his life on the absence of domestic influence. Bowerbank argues, “As his secrets become more complex, Victor is ever aware how far beyond his father’s homey morality his behavior has gone... Victor repeatedly does not dare confide in his ‘deep’ father for fear of being labelled ‘insane’” (Bowerbank 420). It’s hard to say if Victor has veered from his father’s “homey morality,” or if he’s merely mirroring his father’s behavior. Victor’s deviation from, and secrecy toward his home is a reflection of his dismissal from home at the age of seventeen. In keeping with the theme of Shelley’s ambivalent narrative, directly after Victor recalls the “mutual affections” of his childhood homeschool environment, he shares how his father sent him away to “the university of Ingolstadt” (Shelley 25). Moreover, Shelley depicts Victor’s mother’s death in the paragraph after he announces his “departure” to the university, which indicates the instant deterioration of his attachment to domesticity once he’s sent away from home. Therefore, Victor’s domestic environment paradoxically produces his eventual severance from his home.

Robert Walton, on the other hand, signifies how home represents the pivot point of identity via his constant and disclosive correspondence with his sister. William Crisman calls attention to how home is like the hinge of Walton’s identity when he points out, “The story is, after all, in the form of letters from Walton to his sister...suggesting connectedness and interchange” (Crisman 8). As the events of Walton’s life unravel, he never loses sight of home,
which emphasizes his role as the symbolic representation of domestic attachment in the novel. Levy claims that, “Walton’s willingness to imagine his sister’s sufferings and to let it influence his actions is what separates him from Frankenstein, who refuses to recognize the claims of others and consequently entertains no concept of retreat” (Levy 699). Walton’s letters to his “Beloved Sister” back home are the outlet through which Frankenstein and his creation are given a voice. Crisman claims, “the reader is ultimately indebted [to Captain Walton] for all of the information about the Frankenstein story” (Crisman 8). Shelley bestows Robert Walton with the privilege to tell the entire story because he is the only character who sustains an attachment to home. He demonstrates his respect for domesticity when he admits that he cannot withstand the demands of his crew to return home. He confesses to Victor, “I cannot lead them unwillingly to danger, and I must return” (Shelley 156). His loyalty to domestic sentimentality, despite his anti-domestic desire to explore, grants him the opportunity to return home and tell the story of his adventures.

In addition to demonstrating the importance of maintaining an attachment to home, Walton’s character exemplifies how home is the source of inclination. As Bachelard argues, “The house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams” (Bachelard 15). Walton’s ventures begin in his imagination at home in his uncle’s library. His durable bond with domesticity ensures his continued focus on his dreams, which paradoxically drives him further and further from home. Moran argues that, “houses retain and convey memories of the most routine elements of our lives, and... [there is a] complex relation between these memories and [the] broader narratives” (Moran 28) of our existence. Walton’s letters signify his reliance on home; however, his sense of home discordantly consists of longing for adventure and discovery away from home. Therefore, although he agrees to return home once
their ship is free from the ice, he shares Victor Frankenstein’s sentiments: “Do not return to your families with the stigma of disgrace marked on your brows. Return as heroes who have fought and conquered, and who know not what it is to turn their backs on the foe… [Walton responds] I had rather die, than return shamefully,-my purpose unfulfilled” (Shelley 155). Frankenstein’s paradoxical proclamation implies that glory is sought away from home in order to enhance one’s reputation at home. The ominous opening to Frankenstein’s narrative, however, reveals that any achievement is worthless without a home to return to share one’s success. He addresses Walton, who still has a home to retreat to, when he says, “You have hope, and the world before you, and have no cause for despair. But I – I have lost everything, and cannot begin life anew” (Shelley 17). Frankenstein highlights the singular importance of home when he acknowledges its irretrievability once lost. Percy Shelley’s impersonation of Mary Shelley in his preface to Frankenstein, explains that one of Mary’s main concerns in the novel is “the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue” (Shelley 6). Michelle Levy comments on Percy’s preface and argues that Mary Shelley “achieves this by negative example, as the novel documents the dire consequences that follow when domestic affections are disavowed” (Levy 700). Victor Frankenstein’s character confirms Levy’s conclusions because his fatal fate is the result of his antidomestic endeavors, as well as his refusal to offer his creation a home.

If Walton signifies the importance of domestic attachment, Victor Frankenstein characterizes the consequences of intentional domestic displacement. Frankenstein’s narrative begins with an extremely detailed account of the domestic setting he deserts. He tells the story of his father’s benevolence toward the orphaned Caroline Beaufort, Victor’s mother; then, he describes his family’s impeccable household environment. “When my father became a husband
and a parent, he found his time so occupied by the duties of his new situation, that he relinquished many of his public employments, and devoted himself to the education of his children...No creature could have more tender parents than mine” (Shelley 19). At the beginning of his narrative, Victor explains that his home environment taught him compassion and the importance of education. The contrasting depictions of Victor’s domestic situation at the beginning and end of the novel, exaggerates the devastation that occurs by the end of his story. Shelley combines and contrasts incongruous concepts, such as domestic bliss/homelessness and creation/destruction, throughout Frankenstein. Shelley constantly compares the contrasting experience of homelessness and domesticity, which emphasizes the consequences of abandoning and/or denying domesticity. George Levine acknowledges said consequences and incongruities when he claims, “Every death in the novel is a death in the family, literal or figurative: what Frankenstein’s ambition costs him is the family connection which makes life humanly possible...Frankenstein kills his family, and is, in his attempt to obliterate his own creation, his own victim” (Levine 315). Levine identifies how family/home determines a character’s livability via his examination of Victor Frankenstein. Additionally, his analysis calls attention to the oxymoronic quality of Shelley’s novel when he mentions Victor’s contradictory need to destroy his own creation. Victor denies himself, as well as his creation, familial attachment. The result of Victor’s antidomestic behavior is the death and destruction of his entire family, including himself.

I refused, and I did right in refusing, to create a companion for the first creature. He shewed unparalleled malignity and selfishness, in evil: he destroyed my friends; he devoted to destruction beings who possessed exquisite sensations, happiness, and wisdom; nor do I
know where his thirst for vengeance may end...The task of his
destruction was mine, but I have failed...I cannot ask you to
renounce your country and friend, to fulfill this task; and now, that
you are returning to England, you will have little chance of meeting
with him...Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquility, and
avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of
distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. (Shelley 157)

Victor’s actions call attention to his negligence toward domesticity, and his words reveal his
ignorance of the benefits of domestic bliss. He says that he does not “know where [the
creature’s] thirst for vengeance might end” (Shelley 157), even though the creature says he will
“quit the neighborhood of man” (Shelley 101), when he can start a home of his own, away from
human beings. He tells his creator, “You must create a female for me, with whom I can live in
the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. This you alone can do; and I
demand it of you as a right which you must not refuse” (Shelley 101). Victor deserts and
destroys his own home, which causes his inability to provide a home for his creation. Many
theorists, such as George Levine, have acknowledged how “the monster and Frankenstein are
doubles, two aspect of the same being” (Levine 312). Just as Victor’s father sent him away from
home, he refuses to provide domestic bliss for his own offspring. Therefore, they become
opposing sides to the same coin because they’re both discharged from their home. That being
said, it seems even more evident that the events from Shelley’s characters’ initial domestic
setting directs the course of their identity.

Although Walton, Frankenstein and the creature, is removed from home, he is the only
character that Shelley allows a homecoming. Contrary to the sequestered condition of
Frankenstein and the creature, Walton is socially adaptable. Walton’s character embodies the inconsistencies of Shelley’s novel because he conforms to, and contradicts domesticity. “There is no...simple defense of domestic felicity in *Frankenstein*: the father’s advice is too narrow; the lover, Victor, is guilty; the villain, the Creature, is as sinned against as sinning; and the one who returns to domestic tranquility at the end, Walton, does so with bitter reluctance” (Bowerbank 421). Additionally, Walton is able to interpret the narratives of Frankenstein and the creature because he can empathize with their isolation, while he also signifies their lamented connection to home. Levy claims that, “Walton’s greater schooling in the domestic affections makes him a more compassionate listener” (Levy 706) to the creature, than Victor Frankenstein. Shelley illustrates Walton and the creature’s connection via the inversion of the realization of their fantasies. In other words, at the novel’s end, Walton is destined to return to home, and the creature is off to “seek the most northern extremity of the globe” (Shelley 161). Therefore, each lives out the dream of the other, which unites their characters’ identities. Walton’s dedication to domestic manners appears to be the reason why he can communicate and empathize with either side of the domestic/antidomestic dichotomy. He listens to the creature, and like the blind old De Lacey, he assumes the creature is human by the sound of his voice. In another letter home, Walton writes, “there is a sound as of a human voice, but hoarser; it comes from the cabin where the remains of Frankenstein still lie. I must arise, and examine. Good night, my sister” (Shelley 157). Shelley illuminates the creature’s obscurity in this scene via Walton’s reaction to his appearance. “I entered the cabin, where lay the remains of my ill-fated and admirable friend. Over him hung a form which I cannot find words to describe; gigantic in stature, yet uncouth and distorted in its proportions...[skin] like that of a mummy” (Shelley 158). Walton’s response to the creature’s appearance epitomizes the barrier of unrecognizability that the creature can’t cross.
Walker’s discovery of the creature exemplifies Josh Bernatchez’s observation of *Frankenstein*:

“The human versus monster binary is...mirrored in the tension between the physical and the verbal or mental” (Bernatchez 207). The physical world is the obstacle that prevents the creature from becoming domesticated. The creature’s inability to integrate with domestic existence, despite his ardent desire for, and familiarity with domestic processes, is the reverse of Walton’s experience. Walton wishes to journey far from home, but is forced to return. Shelley characterizes the combination and inversion of domestic and antidomestic behavior in Walton, Victor, and the creature, which suggests that the two categorizations rely on one another for validation.

Mary Shelley merges domestic desire and repudiation in each of her three narrators’ autobiographies. In her essay, *The Social Order vs. The Wretch: Mary Shelley’s Contradictory Mindedness in Frankenstein*, Sylvia Bowerbank argues that *Frankenstein*,

[S]entimentally defends, and yet skeptically attacks, domestic and social tranquility. Both the intellectual misfit (Victor Frankenstein) and the physical one (the Creature) are excluded by the intolerance and narrowness of society; yet though they frequently condemn society for its unfitness as a home, they just as often long to be part of it as it is, and rage against themselves for their inability to conform. This contradictoriness permeates the novel. (Bowerbank 419)

Victor demonstrates Bowerbank’s theory when he reflects on his newfound solitude and independence in the chaise that transports him to the university. “My life had hitherto been remarkably secluded and domestic; and this had given me invincible repugnance to new
countenances...I believed myself totally unfitted for the company of strangers” (Shelley 27). He reveals how his home environment informs his narrow perspective. Then, directly after, he confesses that he’s always secretly longed to escape his domestic confinement. “I ardently desired the acquisition of knowledge. I had often, when at home, thought it hard to remain during my youth cooped up in one place, and had longed to enter the world, and take my station among other human beings” (Shelley 27). His conflicting reflections epitomize Bowerbank’s theory, and they divulge his inconsistent ties with home. Shelley presents a similar sentiment in the creature’s reflections about the De Lacey’s later in the novel. “I saw few humans besides them; and if any other happened to enter the cottage, their harsh manners and rude gait only enhanced to me the superior accomplishments of my friends” (Shelley 77). Like Victor, the creature can’t imagine encountering human beings or habits as perfect as those from the place he considers home. Additionally, the creature shares Victor’s paradoxical desire to leave the place he considers home to enter society, despite his negative preconceptions about mankind. First he says, “I learned, from the views of social life which [the De Lacey family history] developed, to admire their virtues, and to deprecate the vices of mankind” (Shelley 88). Then, in the next sentence, he describes how learning their family history, and watching their home environment inspires him to join society; “benevolence and generosity were ever present before me, inciting me with a desire to become an actor in the busy scene where so many admirable qualities were called forth and displayed” (Shelley 88). Unlike Victor, the creature lacks an actual home environment, which prevents him from experiencing domestic interaction, which in turn thwarts his ability to participate in society. Michelle Levy’s synopsis of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s sentiments, “domestic feelings are the origin of all social feelings” (Levy 695), can be applied to each of Shelley’s narrators. The creature cannot integrate into society because he never
experiences the exchange of domestic feelings. As Jean Jacques Rousseau states in the second part of his essay, *On the Origin of Inequality*, “The habit of living together...gave rise to the finest feelings known to humanity, conjugal love and paternal affection. Every family became a little society” (Rousseau 3). The Frankensteins and the De Laceys present how domestic societies, no matter how united and intimate, eventually lead participants away from home out into society. The creature, on the other hand, represents the inability to integrate into society without having first socialized within a home. That being said, his desires never develop into anything more than a longing for domesticity.

III. The Creature at Home in Nature

Before Shelley introduces readers to the homeless creature on the summit of Montanvert, she shows the Frankenstein family’s departure from Geneva. Shelley depicts the disintegration of domesticity, and the ascendency of nature via her description of the Frankenstein’s “excursion to the valley of Chamounix” (Shelley 64).

During the first day we travelled in a carriage...We perceived that the valley through which we wound, and which was formed by the river Arve, whose course we followed, closed in upon us by degrees; and when the sun had set, we beheld immense mountains and precipices overhanging us on every side, and heard the sound of the river raging among rocks, and the dashing of waterfalls around. The next day we pursued our journey upon mules; and as we ascended still higher, the valley assumed a more magnificent and astonishing
character. Ruined castles hanging on precipices of piny mountains; the impetuous Arve, and cottages every here and there peeping forth from among the trees, formed a scene of singular beauty. But it was augmented and rendered sublime by the mighty Alps, whose white and shining pyramids and domes towered above all, as belonging to another earth, the habituation of another race of beings. (Shelley 64)

Shelley’s portrayal of the Frankenstein family’s gradual absorption into nature represents their relocation to the creature’s only home-like environment. She exemplifies their departure from domesticity via the transformative imagery she threads throughout the abovementioned scene. For example, their form of transportation transforms from a “carriage” the first day, to “mules” the next day. Furthermore, their course through the valley “was formed by the river Arve,” as oppose to being carved or paved by man. The manmade structures Shelley calls attention to are either destroyed, engulfed by trees, or terminologically twisted to describe the all-powerful pyramidal Alps. Additionally, the alternate “race of beings” that Victor invents in his imagination foretell the arrival of the creature in the following chapter. Their excursion leads Victor to the wretched and sequestered creature, which is when readers first hear the creature’s side of the story.

The creature is immersed in nature when he’s introduced, as well as when he drifts off into “darkness and distance” (Shelley 161) at the novel’s end, which suggests that he belongs in nature. He even says, “The desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge. I have wandered here many days; the caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me, and the only one which man does not grudge. These bleak skies I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow-beings” (Shelley 68-9). Bachelard argues that, “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the
notion of home... whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter... the imagination builds ‘walls’ of impalpable shadows, comforts itself with the illusion of protection” (Bachelard 5). Bachelard’s theory can be applied several times throughout the novel, such as when the creature recalls, “I began also to observe, with greater accuracy, the forms that surrounded me, and to perceive the boundaries of the radiant roof of light which canopied me” (Shelley 71). The creature confirms Bachelard’s observation when he uses language littered with structural terms such as “roof” and “canopied.” Despite his learned diction, the creature’s recollection of being roofed implies his innate sense of shelter and desire for a home. Shelley’s structural descriptions of the natural world indicate the inexplicable home-like essence of the wilderness, particularly to the creature who can’t participate in society. Additionally, Shelley’s personification of nature opens the door for an analysis of the paradoxical relation of the animate and inanimate. For example, the overhanging mountains mirror the image of the creature hovering over Frankenstein’s dead body at the end of the novel. Walton describes the ineffability if the creature when he recalls, “Over him hung a form which I cannot find words to describe; gigantic in stature, yet uncouth and distorted in its proportions” (Shelley 158). Walton’s words could be used to describe the “sublime” (Shelley 64) Alps, which suggests that the creature’s identity is a reflection of his home in nature. On the other hand, the creature’s origin comes to mind any time Shelley illustrates the animated quality of inanimate objects. Victor’s “sole purpose [was] infusing life into an inanimate body” (Shelley 35) when he created the creature. Therefore, in addition to the wilderness, Victor represents the creature’s home and place of origin. Unlike Victor, however, the wilderness provides the creature with the means to shelter and feed himself. Victor’s scrutiny of the creature’s strange stature, agility, and “superhuman speed” as he approaches him over “the vast river of ice” (Shelley 67) emphasizes the creature’s dissimilarity
to the rest of mankind. Additionally, the creature is limited to the inhabitation of empty huts, which emphasizes his solitude and displacement from home. Even though the creature’s inhabitation of a hut implies that he’s sheltered and somewhat comfortable, after he tells his tale and makes his request it’s apparent that he is not satisfied with isolation. Bachelard argues, “The hermit’s hut is an engraving that would suffer from any exaggeration of picturesqueness. Its truth must derive from the intensity of its essence, which is the essence of the verb ‘to inhabit.’ The hut immediately becomes centralized solitude, for in the land of legend, there is no adjoining hut” (Bachelard 32). If the essence of inhabiting a hut is solitude, then perhaps the creature’s inescapable seclusion and isolation is caused by his temporary hut-homes. Contrary to his constant solitude, the creature’s narrative starts with him inviting Victor into his lodging as a guest. Readers are made aware of a reversal of domestic authority when the wretch induces Victor to “come to the hut upon the mountain” (Shelley 69). Additionally, the wretch’s consideration for Victor’s comfort is a reversal of Victor’s behavior toward him. The wretch compassionately acknowledges that “the temperature of this place is not fitting to [Victor’s] fine sensations” (Shelley 69). Victor, on the other hand, disavows his creation from the moment he comes to life. “[N]ow 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” (Shelley 36). Victor’s domestic inadequacy is highlighted when the creature offers him hospitality, even though he never shows the creature the same courtesy. Victor’s inability to accommodate his creation, and protect his family from the creature’s wrath, suggests that he is domestically inferior to the creature.

IV. Oxymorons: Victor’s Desire to Destroy his own Creation & The Conflation of Inhabitant and House
Victor reveals his self-inflicted subservience to the creature when he recalls how, “He bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution” (Shelley 67). The ease with which the creature leaps across the icy river makes him appear superior to Victor, who has to be careful and cautious as he crosses. John Bugg discusses the creature’s mastery over Victor in his essay, “Master of their language”: Education and Exile in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. He notes how “Frankenstein goes on to name his relationship to the creature as a condition of slavery on several occasions” (Bugg 664). Bugg’s racial analysis of Frankenstein focuses primarily on “somatic difference” (Bugg 656), but his observations can be applied to the differing domestic situations of Victor, the creature, and Shelley’s other characters. Victor’s enslavement is enigmatic because it is self-inflicted, as well as indoctrinated. First he becomes a slave to his desire for knowledge, then to his experiments, and finally to his creation. Prior to any of his subjugated states, Victor’s home environment provides him with the language and circumstances that lead to his enslavement and ruin. Victor warns Walton away from the lure of knowledge when he says, “Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier than man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow” (Shelley 32). Victor’s warning calls attention to the importance of domestic attachment for survival. Both Victor and the creature fail to maintain a relationship with their home, and both of them pay the ultimate price because of their domestic deficiency. The creature also becomes a slave to knowledge once he discovers language, which indicates a similarity between their natures. Chris Baldick calls attention to the interrelatedness of Victor and his creation when he argues, “The parts, in a living being, can only be as beautiful as the animating principle which organizes them, and if this ‘spark of life’ proceeds, as it does in Victor’s creation, from
tormented isolation and guilty secrecy, the resulting assembly will only animate and body forth that condition and display its moral ugliness” (Baldick 35). Baldick acknowledges how the creature’s identity is a product of his place of origin, which showed him rejection and abandonment. Additionally, the creature discovers language and literature elsewhere than his place of origin, like Victor, which highlights how he is a reflection of his creator/place of origin. Victor is sent away from his home and abandoned by his mother, which triggers his decline into deadly persistence and seclusion. When he recollects Elizabeth’s scarlet fever, he mentions “During her confinement, many arguments had been urged to persuade my mother to refrain from attending upon her. She had, at first, yielded to our entreaties; but when she heard that her favorite was recovering, she could no longer debar herself from her society...The consequences of this imprudence were fatal” (Shelley 25). Victor, like his mother, does not refrain from acting on impulse, and both of their careless decisions cause the destruction of their “domestic circle,” as well as their own deaths. Therefore, both the creature and Victor’s identity are manifestations of the conditions of their home environment.

Although Victor and the creature are both shooed away and abandoned in a sense, Victor has memories of home and nostalgia to sustain him in his solitude. “Nothing could equal my delight on seeing Clerval; his presence brought back to my thoughts my father, Elizabeth, and all those scenes of home so dear to my recollection” (Shelley 37). Joe Moran discusses the interrelation of home and nostalgia in his essay, Houses, Habit and Memory. He claims, “‘nostalgia’ is closely associated with ideas of home; it comes from the Greek word nostros (‘to return home’) and algia (‘longing’)” (Moran 34). The creature, unlike Walton and Frankenstein, doesn’t know what it is to feel nostalgia because he has no tangible home to use as a reference for his memories. Instead, the creature only has a conception of, and desire for home. In order to
understand the creature’s mindset, it is important to acknowledge the difference between the concept of *house* and *home*. A house represents the tangible structure which provides a stage for the concept of home to form. Each has a specific definition, but the perception of one regularly merges with the other. A sense of home depends on a particular place for reminiscence and validation. However, a specific place is only as significant as its human inhabitants’ language determines it to be. The interchangeability of the material and immaterial importance of house and home illustrates the intrinsic effect each has on the other. Similarly, inhabitants tend to blend into the atmosphere of their home, and the structure becomes a symbolic representation of their memories. The creature demonstrates the symbolic significance of a home when he recalls how he burned down the “devoted cottage” (Shelley 97). “My protectors had departed, and had broken the only link that held me in the world...when I thought of my friends...anger returned...unable to injure anything human, I turned my fury towards inanimate objects” (Shelley 97). The wretch’s dream of joining the De Lacey’s domestic world represents his chance to be freed from his isolation and classification of fiend. Therefore, he seeks his revenge on the beloved De Laceys via the next best thing to their persons, their home.

The wretch’s display of violence toward the inanimate symbol of the De Lacey family is reminiscent of “The Venerable Armytage’s” musings about the ruined cottage in Wordsworth’s poem, *The Ruined Cottage*.

She is dead,

The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,

Stripp’d of its outward garb of household flowers,

Of rose and sweet-briar, offers to the wind

A cold bare wall whose earthly top is trickled
With weeds and the rank spear-grass. She is dead,
And nettles rot and adders sun themselves
Where we have sate together with she nurs’d
Her infant at her breast.

You will forgive me, sir,

But often on this cottage do I muse
As on a picture, till my wiser mind
Sinks, yielding to the foolishness of grief. (103-119)

Wordsworth’s timeworn wanderer sees the departed inhabitants in the ruins of the familiar cottage, just as the creature destroys the cottage because it symbolizes the De Lacey family. Joe Moran alludes to Pierre Bourdieu’s use of the term *Habitus* (‘what one has’ and ‘how one is’) in order to convey the structural essence of existence: “‘habitus’ [is] a way of connecting individual thought and agency to more structural forces, defining it as a system of internalized dispositions which are the product of one’s material circumstances” (Moran 40). Both the wretch and the venerable villager demonstrate the conflated relationship between residents and residence. The symbolic significance of a home suggests that inhabitants embody the characteristics of their home, and vice versa.

The symbolic significance of home is especially epitomized when the De Laceys flee from the cottage after the creature reveals himself to them. For the De Laceys, the cottage has come to represent the horrifying intruder. For the creature, the cottage symbolizes the De Lacey family that fled from him, which is why he burns it down. The creature acknowledges that he could “with pleasure have destroyed the cottage and its inhabitants, and have gluttoned [himself]
with their shrieks and misery” (Shelley 95), but he resists the cruel temptation and burns it down after they leave. According to David Gage, in his essay *Holding on to ‘Family Cottages’*, “Cottages are where people had formative experiences, and they are cherished because of what they represent about one’s self and family, as well as the sense of continuity that they give family members to their own past and to each other” (Gage 89). The wretch regularly refers to the De Lacey family as “the cottagers,” which reinforces the structurality of their identity because he refers to them by the style of their house. Perhaps the creature chooses to burn the cottage down devoid of the cottagers because in destroying the cherished cottage he obliterates the source of the De Lacey’s comfort and togetherness; and in doing so, he pays them back for doing the same thing to him. Felix tells the landlord, “we can never again inhabit your cottage...Take possession of your tenement, and let me fly from this place” (Shelley 96). Therefore, both Felix and the creature’s actions, after their disturbing encounter, indicate that the structure/shelter is a metonym for its occupants. Additionally, the wretch displays the material components that inform identification when he neglects notice of the De Lacey’s poverty, and instead first takes account of their material advantages. “I saw no cause for their unhappiness...They possessed a delightful house (for such it was in my eyes), and every luxury; they had a fire to warm them when chill...they were dressed in excellent clothes, and, still more they enjoyed one another’s company” (Shelley 76). Before he learns language and empathy, and before he acknowledges the De Lacey’s relationships with one another, the wretch assumes that their material comforts should make them happy. The creature’s observation of the De Laceys demonstrates the notion that identity consists of the assemblage of the various behaviors we assume in response to our material surroundings. Furthermore, just as the creature makes assumptions about the De Laceys
based off of their material surroundings, they assume he’s malicious because of his physical appearance.

Throughout *Frankenstein*, the creature is incapable of crossing into a social subject position from his objectified position of *monster* because of his lack of domesticity and familial connections. Our initial sense of identity is completely derived from the first domestic roles we learn to assume, which are primarily familial, gender, and age based positions such as daughter, son, brother, sister, older, younger, sibling, child, husband, wife. The creature’s want of a place of origin, and his inability to be accepted by society appear to be interrelated issues. Bernatchez calls attention to the importance of recognizability for social acceptance when he comments on Robert Walton’s narrative contribution to Shelley’s novel. He concludes that, “the exiled creature of *Frankenstein* has simply been in constant need of an introduction” (Bernatchez 215). The creature’s unrecognizability is caused by his savage-like appearance and his lack of peers. In his analysis of the creature’s desire to participate in human sympathy and virtue, Bernatchez claims, “The word ‘participated’ exemplifies the idea that virtue is a capacity that must be exercised in conjunction with others and is stifled in isolation” (Bernatchez 208). If the creature had earned a domestic social position, perhaps his familial affiliates could have helped introduce him to society, which would have provided him with the companionship and joy he desires. As Levine argues, “family is an aspect of the self and the self cannot survive bereft of its family” (Levine 315). Levine’s view is proven when the creature loses control of himself after the De Laceys depart from the cottage. The creature is incapable of assimilating to social beings because he is never afforded the essential experience of home. Rousseau’s foundational formulations about human inequality emphasize the difference between isolated subject positions, such as the creature’s, and socialized subject positions, such as the rest of Shelley’s characters. “The savage
lives within himself, while the social man lives constantly outside of himself, and only knows how to live in the opinion of others, so that he seems to receive the consciousness of his own existence merely from the judgement of others concerning him" (Rousseau 14). The creature’s animalistic and introverted existence in the wilderness, as well as his isolation in huts, designates him as the “savage” of Rousseau’s theory. Characters such as Victor and Walton, on the other hand, represent “the social man” because their aspirations stem from their desire to improve their reputations in the opinions of other men. Victor demonstrates his antidomestic desire to experience the life of the savage man when he proclaims, “Alas! Why does man boast of sensibilities superior to those apparent in the brute; it only renders them more necessary beings. If our impulses were confined to hunger, thirst, and desire, we might be nearly free; but we are moved by every wind that blows, and a chance word or scene that that word may convey to us” (Shelley 66). Victor’s avowal is a reversal of the creature’s desire for domesticity, which signifies another example of the incongruity that Shelley depicts throughout her novel. Victor’s proclamation implies that he desires the creature’s condition, but the creature’s testimony reveals how language, which is learned from home, prevents humans from living such a simple existence. With every failed attempt to interact with humans, the creature ironically moves further from his savage introvert identity toward a desire for domesticity. The more he observes inhabitation, the more he desires the domesticity and companionship he observes in others. According to John B. Lamb, “Having a self, [Frankenstein] suggests, depends upon being defined as an object in a world that is already given over to a cultural system of signs, preeminently language, and hence the ‘self’ the monster ‘has’ is only the one posited by the language of that cultural system” (Lamb 308). The creature learns language from the De Lacey family, and just like his creator, he becomes obsessed with the acquisition of language and
knowledge. Furthermore, like Victor and Walton, language and reading reinforces the creature’s separation from domesticity.

V. The De Laceys, Domesticity, and Literacy

Prior to his observation of the De Laceys, which leads to his acquisition of language and self-identification, the creature is confused and incapable of conceptualization. He tells Victor, “It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original aura of my being: all events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt, at the same time; and it was indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses” (Shelley 70). If the creature had remained in nature and come to consider the wilderness his home, instead of discovering domesticity, language, and his inability to belong, perhaps he could have survived in his isolated state. However, as John B. Lamb, and many other theorists, have pointed out, “The monster learns the ‘science of words or letters’ from the De Laceys, and it is then that he enters culture and begins erroneously to believe that language is a form of mastery and a way to overcome difference” (Lamb 314). The creature recalls his introduction to language when he tells Victor, “I found that [the De Laceys] possessed a method of communicating their experiences and feelings to one another by articulating sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pain or pleasure…This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it” (Shelley 77). His recollections of learning language reveals how he could not have becomes literate if he did not have a household to observe and learn from. “By great application…and after having remained during the space of several revolutions of the moon in my hovel, I discovered the names that were given to some of the most familiar objects of discourse…I learned and applied the words fire, milk, bread, and wood” (Shelley 77). After he’s
mastered language, he discovers the three books that shape his perceptions and his self-
consciousness. Like Walton and Victor, the creature’s existence is guided by the books he
discovers: *Paradise Lost*, *Plutarch’s Lives*, and *Sorrows of Young Werter*.

As I read...I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike the beings concerning whom I read, and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathized with, and partly understood them, but I was unformed in mind; I was dependent on none, and related to none. “The path of my departure was free;” and there was none to lament my annihilation. My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually reoccurred, but I was unable to solve them. (Shelley 89)

Just as Walton’s books led him away from home in order to discover new landscapes, and Victor’s books led him away from home to pursue a life of scientific experimentation, the creature’s books lead him away from domesticity because they reveal to him his reclusive identity. John Bugg argues that, “It is of the utmost of poignancies that Shelley follows the passage on education with the Creature’s realization of his own monstrosity, when he observes his reflection in a ‘transparent pool.’...By acquiring literacy he only becomes more familiar...with the terms of his own alterity” (Bugg 661). Although the creature’s books do not destroy his desire for domesticity, their separate plots predict the demise of his being. The *Sorrows of Young Werter* especially emphasizes the creature’s inability to belong, and it also foreshadows his self-proclaimed suicide. Shelley’s choice to include *Plutarch’s Lives* in the creature’s collection of books highlights the parallelism of the creature and Victor’s identities.

Furthermore, the creature’s recollection of the first hut he enters foreshadows his enigmatic and cursed existence via imagery from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. The old man flees from his hut and the wretch recalls, “his flight, somewhat surprised me. But I was enchanted by the appearance of the hut: here the snow and rain could not penetrate; the ground was dry; and it
presented to me then as exquisite and divine a retreat as Pandemonium appeared to the demons of hell after their sufferings in the lake of fire” (Shelley 72). The creature demonstrates the influence *Paradise Lost* has on his perceptions when he cites the text in his narrative.

Additionally, the ominous reference to Milton’s depiction of the capital of Hell and the dreaded lake of fire indicates the attractiveness of a communal structure, especially to those who are condemned to a paradoxical and outcast existence, like the wretch. John B. Lamb digs deep into the demonized identity of the wretch in his analysis of *Frankenstein* and Milton, which motivates a comparison of the wretch to the beings caught in Milton’s fire water. Milton paints a pristine picture of paradox via his depiction of the damned demons.

> Chained on the burning lake? That sure was worse.

> Of Hell should sprout her cataracts of fire,

> Caught in a fiery tempest shall be hurled

> Each on his rock transfixed, the sport and prey

> Of racking whirlwinds, or for ever sunk

> Under your boiling ocean, wrapped in chains. (169-83)

Milton makes readers visualize fire in diverse forms of water such as a lake, cataracts, a tempest, and the ocean. Shelley, like Milton, makes her readers imagine two opposing concepts in one image. Milton imbues fire with the properties of water, and Shelley merges the components of man and animal. Both writers persuade their readers to acknowledge the distinct difference between opposing ideas via the imaginative conflation of contradictory concepts. Shelley and Milton’s tendency to make readers distinguish between opposing concepts calls attention to the
human need to decipher and categorize in order to understand something or someone. The contradictory nature of Shelley’s characters’ domestic/antidomestic identities coerces readers to identify and understand the characters’ sense of self in relation to their surroundings. Furthermore, the creature’s reference to Milton’s text indicates the influence the book has over his sense of self.

The creature’s educational experience of watching the De Lacey household implies that home is where language is learned, and language is the instrument that leads to assumed identities. As Scott Brewster argues, “language is the house of Being, and there is a fundamental interconnectedness between language, being and dwelling” (Brewster 144). The De Lacey family members demonstrate Brewster’s argument in their everyday routines, and assumed roles and responsibilities. The creature’s observation of the cottagers’ interaction with domestic space shows how households prompt specific habits, which in turn inform the identity of particular inhabitants. For example, Agatha “went into the garden for some roots and plants, which she placed in water, and then upon the fire...[Felix] went into the garden, and appeared busily employed in digging and pulling up roots” (Shelley 75). Agatha’s role in the garden requires her to make use of the roots that Felix excavates and supplies for her. Their differing tasks remind one of the reproductive relationship between men and women: the man supplies and the woman generates. Raewyn Connell claims, “gender is intransigent, both as a structure of society and as a structure of personal life” (Connell 868). Agatha and Felix’s gendered roles appear intransigent because of the roles they assume around their household. Their domestic interactions mold them into specific gender-based subject positions. Michael McKeon states, “[I]n civil society, gender-based subordination is predetermined by subordination in the family” (McKeon 175). Felix and
Agatha’s domestic performances, as well as the incestuous undertones of their relationship, imply that gender and sexuality are identifications we learn from our household roles.

The creature watches the actions of the cottagers and memorizes their routines, which teaches him the difference between male and female. His surveillance of their daily life reveals how their identities are completely derived from their household responsibilities.

Looking through a small chink, I beheld a young creature, with a pail on her head, passing before my hovel. The girl was young and of gentle demeanour, unlike what I have since found cottagers and farm-house servants to be. Yet she was meanly dressed, a coarse blue petticoat and a linen jacket being her only garb; her fair hair was plaited, but not adorned; she looked patient, yet sad, I lost sight of her; and in about a quarter of an hour she returned, bearing the pail, which was now partly filled with milk. As she walked she seemed incommoded by the burden. (Shelley 74)

There are various inferences readers can make about Agatha’s person and social position as a result of the creature’s description. Her femininity forms the foundation of her identity, and her character’s fictitiousness reinforces the notion that her identity is a fabrication, informed by her household tasks. Our first impression of Agatha emits images of maternity and meagerness: she bears milk, but must be relieved of its burdensome weight. The wretch recognizes Agatha and Felix’s varying indoor and outdoor roles when he says, “The young man was constantly employed out of doors, and the girl in various laborious occupations within” (Shelley 76). Our initial introduction to Agatha depicts a hardworking girl, hardly able to handle the outdoor task of carrying a half-filled pail. So right away the wretch recognizes women’s impotence outdoors, and directly afterwards he is made aware of men’s might and capability outside. “A young man met her... Uttering a few sounds with an air of melancholy, he took the pail from her head, and bore it to the cottage himself. She followed, and they disappeared” (Shelley 74). Agatha follows Felix’s lead, and his dominant disposition insinuates that he’s the protagonist of the outdoor
stage. Their disappearance into the cottage triggers the end of a scene, which is quickly followed by a view of life indoors and a reconsideration of roles.

The creature watches the next scene through “a small and almost imperceptible chink” in a boarded up window, “through which the eye could just penetrate. Through this crevice a small room was visible, white-washed and clean, but very bare of furniture” (Shelley 74). Between their tattered clothes and scantily furnished home, the cottagers’ poverty is obvious to readers, and their roles are consequently predictable: two hard working children who take care of their disabled father. Just as Felix relieved Agatha of the pail outside, Agatha establishes her leading role indoors when she “met him at the door, helped to relieve him of the burden, and taking some of the fuel into the cottage, placed it on the fire...he shewed her a large loaf and a piece of cheese. She seemed pleased” (Shelly 75). The transfer of advantage takes place at the threshold of the home, and each sibling's performance adapts appropriately with every change of room. Agatha’s importance indoors is emphasized when she feeds the fire: a source of warmth, survival, food and family fusion. Felix hands off the burden of his wood to her before he comes inside; and just as Agatha submits and transfers a symbol of her reproductive burden to him outside, she takes the phallic load from him and fosters the fire. Her authority is additionally established when Felix serves as her assistant in the kitchen. Agatha feeds the fire and the family, and is therefore recognized as nurturing and motherly. Felix plays the role of provider in many scenes; he offers his strength, brings home fuel for the fire, and supplies Agatha with bread and cheese. The sexual innuendos that occur between brother and sister in the aforementioned scenes, imply that household performance informs the sexuality of characters' selves. When Agatha goes into the garden readers are reminded of Adam and Eve, which brings to mind original sin and sexuality. “She afterwards continued her work, whilst the young man went into
the garden, and appeared busily employed in digging and pulling up roots. After he had been employed thus about an hour, the young woman joined him, and they entered the cottage together” (Shelley 75). Agatha and Felix display the differences between either gender’s sexuality. Oxymoronically, they each characterize infertility as well, which suggests that propagation within their particular relationship (siblings) is unregulated by nature and normality. Agatha’s inability to bear milk implies an incapacity to nurture a child, while Felix’s ferocious removal of roots from the ground conveys his prohibition of procreation. Their togetherness, however, illustrates a domestic bond that defines their separate, yet connected identities.

The creature confirms that sexuality and conjugal love are learned behaviors from home when he admits his desires and requests a female counterpart. His wants mirror the behavior he observes in Agatha and Felix’s relationship, and especially in the relationship between Safie and Felix. As he learns language, he begins to decipher the different roles and relationships that develop within the De Lacey household, and his lonely hut is no longer satisfactory as solely a shelter. “A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability…to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house” (Bachelard 17). The creature eventually recognizes that companionship, as well as the comforts of a shelter, are necessary in order to achieve a sense of self, which in turn becomes part of the soul of a house, and forms a home. He also emphasizes the suffering that accompanies solitude, and he shares how his alienation causes his longing for companionship. He says, “I am alone, and miserable; man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me” (Shelley 101). Directly after he accuses mankind of alienating him from their society, the creature reenacts their narrow perspective, and expresses his shared desire for domestic bliss. “You must create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of
those sympathies necessary for my being” (Shelley 101). He alienates his prospective wife, and mimics man’s behavior when he assumes that her deformity will determine her estranged identity. Jonathan Dollimore might label the wretch’s reenactment of mankind’s domestic behavior as, “another paradox of perversion: it is very often perceived as at once utterly alien to what it threatens, and yet, mysteriously inherent within it” (Dollimore 121). Furthermore, the creature emphasizes the imitative nature of identity when he demands from Dr. Frankenstein, “a creature of another sex” (Shelley 102). Just as he “often took [Felix’s] tools” (Shelley 77), and acted out his chores, the creature imitates the desires he saw Felix display toward Safie. He also acknowledges the importance of recognizability when he imagines, “we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another” (Shelley 102). His desires are Hegelian, in the sense that Judith Butler defines Hegel’s theories; “desire is always a desire for recognition and that it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings” (Butler 2). Furthermore, he illustrates the overriding influence normalcy and commonness have on identity, as well as sociality, when he links community with shared appearance. The wretch’s imaginings confirm Dollimore’s view: “If the abnormal, socially dislocated individual lays claim to being more authentic than the normal, such authenticity is rooted nevertheless in the selfsame categories, spiritual and moral, which make [him] abnormal to begin with” (Dollimore 50). He visualizes his escape from society via mirror images of the domesticity he surveilles and the civilization he comes to despise.

VI. Language Leads him Home to Die

If the creature never discovered domesticity and language, he never would have realized his alienation. Furthermore, if he remained illiterate and isolated in the wilderness, he never
would have felt or committed the evilness that language implanted in his conscious. Shelley presents readers with a glimpse of the ambiguous identity the creature would have maintained if he remained in nature when she shows him imitating the birds. “Sometimes I tried to imitate the pleasant songs of the birds, but was unable. Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again” (Shelley 71). The creature’s fear of his own sounds foreshadows society’s response to him. Additionally, his first experience with fire foreshadows his eventual experience with domesticity. “I found fire...and was overcome with delight at the warmth...In my joy I thrust my hand into the live embers, but quickly drew it out again with a cry of pain. How strange, I thought, that the same cause should produce such opposite effects!” (Shelley 71). His confusing experience with fire is a metaphor for his eventual experience with mankind: first he is enthralled, then burnt and deserted. In the wild, he learns that “fire gave light as well as heat; and that the discovery of this element was useful to [him] in [his] food” (Shelley 72). Bowerbank argues that the creature “needs human community. He cannot figure out how to relight fire, and more poignantly, he cannot teach himself language by imitating birds...Pathetically, the more he learns to understand from the cottagers, the more he loves them and accepts their viewpoints” (Bowerbank 428). Bowerbank’s argument suggests that the creature “needs” to join society, whereas he is obviously capable of surviving on his own (he has a mountain hut). However, perhaps it is the acquisition of language and knowledge that causes the creature to be more perceptive, and capable of survival in the wilderness. Surveilling the cottagers, as well as studying Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, teaches the creature to imagine various forms and uses for fire. Eventually, he uses the fire as an excuse to introduce himself to the old man. He recalls to Victor how he entered the De Lacey cottage and said, “Pardon this intrusion...I am a traveler in want of
a little rest; you would greatly oblige me, if you would allow me to remain a few minutes before
the fire” (Shelley 93). First the creature demonstrates how domesticity informs his sense of
language, then he shows how language transforms his perspective. His use for fire transmutes
from a want and need, to a means for deceit. Allen claims, “Hearth and home. The connection is
ancient and universal…So if hearth in some way corresponds to dwelling, then identifying the
origins of the controlled use of fire is very helpful toward understanding the evolution of the
feeling for home” (Allen 104). If fire and shelter are historically synonymous, as Allen suggest,
then are we to assume that home, like fire, produces contradictory effects on inhabitants? If so,
what sort of consequential scars does inhabitation leave on our selfhood?

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* demonstrates how fire is a symbol of unification and
community throughout. For instance, the creature is unable to produce fire without help, and he
also uses the De Lacey household fire as an excuse to introduce himself to the blind old father.
The creature’s worst enemy is others’ eyesight, which instantly identifies him as something to be
feared and fought off. Abbe Du Bos “portrayed sight as the most powerful of the senses and
explored the experience of being a spectator to…other people” (Marshall 593). The wretch
highlights the significance of eyesight in relation to social acceptance when he considers that he
“ought to have familiarized the [blind] old De Lacy to [himself], and by degrees have discovered
[himself] to the rest of the family, when they should have been prepared for [his] approach”
(Shelley 96). He is assumed to be human when his appearance is not taken into consideration,
whereas his sensitive and sophisticated interior is useless when his monstrous exterior is seen.
His alarming appearance prevents him from earning the approval of his creator, and winning the
favor of his beloved cottagers. The De Lacey’s rejection of the creature impedes his ability to
practice the compassionate behavior he learns from them, and guarantees his eternal
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estrangement from home and mankind. Therefore, one of the benefits of inhabiting a home, in
*Frankenstein*, is social recognizability and acceptance. Conversely, the creature’s existence
demonstrates the effects of homelessness, which for him is eternal isolation and loneliness.
Shelley combines the incongruous desires for and against domesticity in each of the narrators
from *Frankenstein*. In doing so, she reveals how an attachment to home is imperative to the
acquisition of language/knowledge, which leads to the comprehension of self and others, as well
as a better chance at survival.

Walton is emotionally attached to home the entire novel, which is why Shelley grants
him survival and homecoming. Victor, on the other hand, is not only sent away from his home,
he causes the devastating destruction of his family’s domestic bliss. Therefore, he is destined to
die once he is devoid of domestic attachment. The creature is the only character that doesn’t
experience domesticity, he is indefinitely trapped in a state of orphanhood. As Criscilla Benford
argues,

> The creature, is a self without a society…Unable to claim identity
> from childhood experiences, a family, a father, or a nation, the
> creature offers sensory confusion and emergent self-sufficiency as
> his point of origin…When the creature eventually learns about
> social identities derived from material possessions and lineage he
> quickly realizes that he, standing outside standard systems of
> classification, lacks one. (Benford 328)

The creature represents the inescapability of a transient existence if one is without a domestic
environment to call home. The last two sentences of Shelley’s novel indicate the creature’s
inability to be housed, while they also depict his return to home, which he earlier considered to
be the wilderness. “[The wretch] sprung from the cabin-window, as he said [his farewells to
Victor and Walton], upon the ice-raft which lay close to the vessel. He was soon borne away by
the waves, and lost in darkness and distance. The end” (Shelley 161). Shelley’s ending depicts
the wretch ejecting himself from a “cabin-window,” which brings to mind the domesticity of the cottagers and suggests his inability to belong. Shelley presents the complex interrelatedness of shelter, inhabitation, domesticity, sociality, household habituation and identity, throughout Frankenstein. With the last two sentences, she presents readers with task of deciding whether or not the wretch lived on in his transient state because of his homelessness, or whether he lamented his crimes against humanity enough to kill himself. If we consider that he was never truly accepted by mankind, and never belonged to a household, then it may be accurate to imagine that he lived on in his transient state like a Tarzan or Mowgli character, until his dying day. Being that we never see the creature’s cremation, it is safe to suggest that he could have returned to his home in the wilderness. To imagine the creature’s survival in the wilderness is to see him at home. His sequestered identity is a reflection of where he first learned how to discern and sense his surroundings and his self, which implies that he belongs alone in the wilderness. The imagery that Shelley uses to describe the creature’s impending cremation suggests that he absorbs into nature, just as the domesticated characters blend into their home environments. “I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames...my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace” (Shelley 161). Shelley illustrates the creature being engulfed in fire, then dispersed over water by the wind. Therefore, at the end of Frankenstein the creature is finally immersed in his home environment, and incongruously imagined most alive in death.
Works Cited


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