

# The elements of mary shelley's autobiography in frankenstein

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



As a professor of psychology and the author of a host of books that examine various psychological elements at play in some of the most recognized pop culture mainstays within the science fiction genre, Sherri Ginn seems more than qualified to offer an insightful analysis of both the science fact and the science fiction to be found within the narrative of Mary Shelley's

Frankenstein. That insight is put on nearly full display in her essay "Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: Science, Science Fiction, or Autobiography?"

Ultimately, however, the essay fails in its promise to fulfill the suggestive thesis within its title. Ginn's thesis is that all the trappings of scientific reality and fiction to be found in Frankenstein serve to disguise or distract the reader from interpreting the text within an autobiographical framework.

Unfortunately, Sherri Ginn's tantalizing title fails to deliver fully on its provocative promise by pulling back from fully committing to a view that novel can be read autobiographically. As an essayist, Ginn steadfastly refuses to make the most obvious connection by linking Mary Shelley's biographical history with the novel's fictional narrative.

In a classic example of anticlimax, right at the exact moment that Ginn could have forwarded a truly challenging proposition for her thesis, she caves in to the standard conservative phallogocentric interpretation of the text that has been the engine driving scholarly consideration for two centuries. After building a case from rather solid thematically coherent evidence in support of the possibility of reading Frankenstein as thickly veiled autobiography, Ginn commits the unpardonable sin of declaring this evidence inadmissible on the basis that "while in many respects Victor Frankenstein is modeled on Percy Shelley, there is no evidence that Percy resented such a portrayal.

And, Mary never repudiated her father or her father's treatment of her" (Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: Science, Science Fiction, or Autobiography?*). Like so many critics before her, Ginn herself becomes guilty of interpreting the work of Mary Shelley—albeit through an autobiographical lens—as having a patriarchal center. The simplistic insistence that Shelley's famous husband is the model for Dr. Frankenstein, delivered while inexplicably linking Frankenstein's rejection of the creature with Mary's famous philosopher father, needlessly moves the focus of an autobiographical interpretation away from the author and onto—once again—the brilliant men who surrounded the young female author.

What is especially frustrating about Ginn's failure to follow through on the autobiographical aspect of her thesis is that she actually manages to make contact with the central piece of thematic evidence which most strongly supports the argument. When Ginn observes that reversing certain stages of Erikson's framework for the development of men makes it more suitable for the development of a woman, she seems poised to deliver a direct hit upon the potential for *Frankenstein* to be read as an autobiographical account. Extraordinarily, the following turns out to be only a glancing blow: "women are socialized to pursue intimate relationships and these relationships are more important concerns for female adolescents than is the development of an identity" (Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: Science, Science Fiction, or Autobiography?*). This ability to overlook the obvious that seems downright shocking when the perpetrator is a female writer in the 21st century is considerably less shocking when displayed by a male reviewer in 1818. And

yet, taken together, Sherri Ginn and Walter Scott both exhibit a level of obliviousness that it is almost impossible to believe is anything other than willed ignorance.

The lengthy piece published by Walter Scott upon the anonymous publication of *Frankenstein* in 1818 is ostensibly a review of the relative literary merits of the novel, but closer scrutiny reveals that it is in fact an intense summarization of the narrative. Then, further scrutiny reveals that while Scott proves capable of following every minute detail of that narrative, he manages to miss the obvious bigger picture by an even wider margin than Ginn. If one were to make a few minor adjustments [presented in brackets], it would be quite easy to apply the point that Ginn makes about the development of the female identity to one of the few genuinely—if unintentionally—discerning moments to be found in Scott's review: "The self-education of the monster [Mary Shelley], considering the slender opportunities of acquiring knowledge that he [she] possessed, we have already noticed as improbable and overstrained. That he [Mary Shelley] should have not only learned to speak, but to read, and, for aught we know, to write" is beyond the ability of the reviewer to imagine possible. This inability of many throughout the centuries to imagine the daughter of William Godwin and the wife of Percy Shelley and the travel companion of Lord Byron and the other exalted male minds with whom she associated being capable of writing such an astonishingly original novel is the autobiographical element most prominently absent from Ginn's thesis and the one that could have transformed her conclusion.

Ginn's contention is that "meeting Percy gave Mary a further sense of identity, beyond that afforded to her by being the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin" (Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: Science, Science Fiction, or Autobiography?*). This conclusion serves only to establish Ginn among the denizens of those who made Mary Shelley feel like a monstrous creature constructed from the various parts of those around her. If Ginn's conclusion had been that *Frankenstein* was what gave Mary the sense of identity which arrived with proving to men like Walter Scott that acquiring such knowledge as a female is not impossible, she might not have been so afraid of her premise that she actually gamed it against her very own thesis. Shelley's novel is autobiographical. The Creature is the symbolic realization of Mary Shelley's view of herself as more than just a ragged collection of thoughts and ideas plucked and amalgamated from the men around her. The Creature is forever underestimated by everyone it comes into contact with. Including, sadly, women writers in the 21st century who should know better.