THE SENSE AND SENSIBILITY OF THE 19TH CENTURY FANTASTIC

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DEDICATION

To Traci DeMerchant, who read everything first; my grandparents, who supported me for many years and only missed seeing this by a little while; to my mother, who has always supported me even when she wasn’t sure whether that meant giving permission or talking me out of what I proposed to do; to Jim Saulino, who has always been there; to Joe Sanders, who has been a constant source of support; to Judith Collins-McCormick, who listens; and to Gary K. Wolfe, who read it all last. I couldn’t have done it without all of them.
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Preface

I’m going to begin with a story first, because narrative is, as Toni Morrison has said, one of the most powerful ways we pass on knowledge.

On the morning of February 24, 2007, I awoke from an extraordinarily clear dream. I was walking with a friend along the streets of a modern English city with old roots. There were many old stone buildings; as we walked, we passed a cathedral, and then crossed a university campus with rolling green lawns. We were discussing my difficulties with my last Ph.D. qualifications and, as we walked and talked, we began looking for somewhere to have lunch. The first place we chose, one of the university’s refectories, proved unsatisfactory; it was crowded, noisy, and the food wasn’t very good. We left in search of something better.

And then the scene phased seamlessly into something else: we continued to walk and talk about my problems in exactly the same way as before, but I was clad in chain and plate armor and bore a sword strapped to my hip, while Professor James wore the robes of a Jesuit priest, the teachers among the clergy. We were in the same city, but much earlier…about 800 years earlier. We were earnestly discussing not my prospectus, but a knightly vigil—the head of my order did not approve of my kind of crusade (we had clashed over the issue of readability in academic prose). Instead of a senior scholar and a graduate student whose interests weren’t necessarily mainstream, my companion was a priest and I was a paladin in the last stages of training. We eventually found a man with a
stall selling live birds; for a couple of coins, our meal turned out to be a somewhat badly roasted chicken on a spit, only a slight improvement over the college cafeteria.

We ate our food lounging against some trees near the edge of the town, watching the people who passed by, overhearing their talk. In that way, we discovered that the town had grown up near a slumbering dragon; the people lived alongside it. We thought them lunatics, but there was a kind of logic to it; the dragon only got nasty now and then, so setting up a town on top of its lair was no worse than living in Tornado Alley. It was not an entirely happy place; the tension was palpable. We, as a soldier-acolyte and a priest, sworn to serve the good of humanity, fell to considering whether there was aught to do. The dragon was listening. We were at a higher elevation, standing on an overhang in the parkland where the beast lay, looking down at it, when it opened its big yellow eyes to gaze at us. Its malice was penetrating. It moved, the earth quaked, and I fell. I fell from a height, onto the great garnet-scaled, ridged and whiskered face, right into its staring yellow eye. At that point I woke up; the last thing I remember was trying to draw my sword before landing up to my knees in dragon eyeball, hoping that my companion was praying.

That actual conversation took place on the afternoon of August 25, 2006, in London. My friend and I discussed examinations, the process of writing, and the state of academia. When I left England the following day, I was no less anxious, and continued to struggle with my feelings about my progress and my future. Academics live alongside sleeping dragons—from departmental politics to national politics and the corporatization of universities, many of our anxieties are completely justified. Months later, even as I
successfully navigated through my qualifying examinations—the rite of passage I saw as a knightly vigil—I was still disturbed by emotions I couldn’t quite grasp. I realized that I was deeply afraid that I was going to fall directly into something that, despite long years of training, I wouldn’t be able to handle, and it might mean the end of me, or my identity as a scholar.

It wasn’t something I could have so clearly envisioned in the waking world. Anxiety about forms and deadlines and scholarly rigor are only worries, and talking about them couldn’t resolve what I was feeling—real, visceral fear. I’d had to transform the vagaries and unknowns of the process into something worth fearing, and embody them in something I could fight. And the fantastical imagery of knights and dragons seemed the purest, most archetypal way of embodying these fears. That is a key reason why I chose to investigate the fantastic in this thesis—to explore how it works in literature, how it can embody and amplify real-world anxieties and concerns, and how it evolved in the works of some key writers of the Victorian era.
Introduction

Creatures of Feeling, Imagination, and Reason

I never may believe

These antique fables nor these fairy toys.

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,

Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend

More than cool reason ever comprehends.

--Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act V, Scene 1

Not for these I raise

The song of thanks and praise

But for those obstinate questionings

Of sense and outward things,

Fallings from us, vanishings;

Blank misgivings of a Creature

Moving about in worlds not realized.


This study will examine the subversive and transformative function of the
fantastic in nineteenth-century literature, particularly how the novel *Frankenstein* (1831), the poem “Goblin Market” (1862), and the novel *Dracula* (1897) make deliberate uses of the materials of fantastic literature to engage in social and cultural commentary on key issues of their time, and by so doing to mark a significant transformation in the way fantastic materials can be used in narrative. At first, these may seem arbitrary choices from a century that saw a blossoming of fantastic literature in England in many forms, from late expressions of the Gothic novel to the children’s classics of Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, and others. But as I hope to demonstrate, these titles in particular provide evidence of the power of the fantastic to address various social issues in a sophisticated literary way, while their areas of congruity are more significant than has previously been noted. In selecting the works I am treating in this thesis, I have adopted John Clute’s broad-ranging and historically based definition of *fantastika*, a kind of meta-genre including fantasy, science fiction, and horror, which clearly would include *Frankenstein*, “Goblin Market,” and *Dracula*; and Gary K. Wolfe’s notion that the fantastic-in-exile during the nineteenth century—a blossoming of fantastic fiction in the face of the dominant aesthetic of domestic realism—also saw the roots of the modern genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror.¹

¹ In his essay “Malebolge, or the Ordnance of Genre,” Wolfe argues that with the rise of realism as a dominant aesthetic in Victorian fiction, fantastic narratives were largely relegated to children’s literature or subgenres such as the occult novel or the novel of sensation, many of whose characteristics prefigured these modern genres.
My title refers to how each of these works is a key transitional text in nineteenth-century fantastic literature, both in terms of the capacity of the fantastic to interrogate the significant social issues of the day, and of the rhetorically sophisticated manner by which they achieve their aims. In other words, *Frankenstein*, “Goblin Market,” and *Dracula* critique or subvert their cultural moments; their effectiveness lies significantly in the construction of narratives in which seemingly archaic forms are adapted to address contemporary anxieties, and in which the fantastic elements become sophisticated tools for interrogating social issues. In so doing, these works also represent an important shift between older and more contemporary forms and uses of *fantastika*: what had once been thought of largely as children’s diversions or lurid thrillers becomes a powerful vehicle for social and cultural commentary, arguably as powerful as the novel of social realism which was a dominant form of Victorian fiction. *Frankenstein* demonstrates how the Gothic novel could give rise to an early form of science fiction, just as “Goblin Market” shows how the materials of the fairy tale could provide a template for later feminist fantasy and *Dracula* shows how the novel of sensation could evolve into the contemporary literary horror novel. Each of these works demonstrates how such materials may be adapted to sophisticated literary and social purposes, and each foreshadows the development of a significant subgenre of contemporary fantastic literature. The “sense” of these works, then, refers to the familiar archaic narrative forms which they employ, while the “sensibility” lies in their adaptation of these forms to address some of the central social and cultural issues of their era.
The actual literary and historical connections between these works may seem limited but are not insignificant: Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* emerged from the same famous 1816 storytelling session at Byron’s Villa Diodati as did John Polidori’s *The Vampyre* (1819), and Polidori himself was Christina Rossetti’s uncle. Although he died several years before she was born, she was clearly aware of this family legacy of imaginative storytelling, and as we shall see later, a number of critics have viewed Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” as a direct response to and reworking of elements of Polidori’s novel. Similarly, there is at least some evidence that Stoker’s original conception of the figure of Dracula may have been partly inspired by *Frankenstein*; one entry in Stoker’s journal refers to “Story of man brought back to life in a dissecting room by the application of a new power unexpected” (*Lost Journal* 58), and his notes on *Dracula* itself shows that in a discarded version of the opening chapter, Jonathan Harker describes the Count as an “old dead man made alive” (*Notes for Dracula* 17).

Furthermore, as Adam Roberts convincingly argues, each work is part of a persistent Gothic strain that erupted with some regularity in Victorian fiction. Writing of *Frankenstein, Dracula, Polidori’s The Vampire, Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* and Reynolds’s *Wagner the Wehr-Wolf,* Roberts says:

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2 Polidori’s novel led to a series of stage adaptations, and even Queen Victoria praised Dion Boucicault’s haunting portrayal of the vampire. As Jim Steinmeyer writes, “Stoker met Boucicault at the Theatre Royal in Dublin, where the Irish playwright was a local celebrity. In the 1870s, Bram Stoker would have recognized a vampire as a creature primarily associated with the theater, since that’s where the most popular vampires had managed to gorge themselves on box office receipts” (32-33).
What all these monsters have in common is their protean ability to transform, to move from unexceptional ‘human’ behavior to barbaric, violent, transgressive, unfettered. In this respect, they are emblematizations of the protean force of the Gothic novel itself; a form capable of being associated with supernatural excess, but one that proved easily capable of assuming the shape of mundane Victorian domestic fiction. Many of the most successful nineteenth century novels contain, coiled within them, a beating Gothic heart. In Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* family life and love receive a Byronic injection of Gothicized passion and terror in the form of Heathcliff; Dickens’s novels try with varying degrees of success to contain grotesque, bizarre, and disruptive urban forces within the narrative container of middle-class trajectories of life and love; Christina Rossetti wrote a great many controlled poems of Christian devotional and confessional type, but is remembered today for the vibrantly realized children’s-Gothic of her long poem *Goblin Market* (1862). (Roberts 31-32)

My argument is not that any one of these works directly influenced another, but that each of them shares this “eruptive” tradition that Roberts describes, and that each goes a step further toward discovering socially significant uses for the fantastic. In order to fully understand the importance of such an achievement, and to provide context for the approach to the subversive nature of the fantastic that I am arguing for, a brief exploration of some historical and contemporary theoretical approaches to the fantastic
may be helpful, particularly in understanding how the fantastic became marginalized in the first place. The remainder of this Introduction will explore some historical discussions of the role and function of the fantastic, particularly in narrative literature, followed by an examination of more contemporary theoretical approaches, a consideration of how fantastic literature can function as social commentary without compromising such key narrative values as character development, and—my key argument here—how these elements can be combined to characterize the fantastic as a “literature of subversion,” to use critic Rosemary Jackson’s term.

**Early Debates on the Fantastic in Literature**

In one sense “the fantastic” needs no definition; we can all easily recognize that such icons as monsters, goblins, and vampires are not part of the “real world.” On the other hand, the proliferation of different modes or genres of the fantastic over the past couple of centuries has given rise to a wide-ranging theoretical debate, often involving the modern genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. As Rosemary Jackson states, the word “fantastic” is derived from Latin and Greek roots meaning “that which is made visible, visionary, unreal. In this general sense, all imaginary activity is fantastic, all literary works are fantasies. Given such an infinite scope, it has proved difficult to provide an adequate definition of fantasy as a literary kind” (13).

Yet a lively discussion of the nature and uses of fantastic writing had been going on for well over a century before Mary Shelley began to write *Frankenstein*, the earliest of the books to be considered here, and the works I am discussing need to be considered
in terms of these early debates as well as in the context of later theories. As early as 1691
John Dryden (in his preface to the opera *King Arthur*) alluded to “that Fairy kind of
writing, which depends only upon the Force of Imagination” (7), and in 1712 Joseph
Addison, quoting Dryden’s phrase, wrote of “a kind of writing wherein the poet quite
loses sight of Nature, and entertains his reader’s imagination with the characters and
actions of such persons as have many of them no existence but what he bestows on them;
such are fairies, witches, magicians, demons, and departed spirits” (*The Spectator*, 419).
A few decades later, Lord Henry Home Kames, in his 1762 *Elements of Criticism*
assigned the term “imagination” to “this singular power of fabricating images without
any foundation in reality” (cited in “Imagination,” *Oxford English Dictionary*). It was
inevitable that the Romantic poets should take up this discussion, and by 1810 a similar
notion of the imagination was described by William Blake as “Visionary Fancy,” arguing
that it was quite distinct from allegory or fable: “Fable or Allegory is Form’d by the
daughters of Memory, Imagination is surrounded by the daughters of Inspiration” (604).
Percy Bysshe Shelley made a similar point in his *Defence of Poetry* (written 1821,
published 1840) when he wrote that poetry

…defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of
surrounding impressions. And whether it spreads its own figured curtain,
or withdraws life’s dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally
creates for us a being within our being. It makes us inhabitants of a world
to which the familiar world is chaos. It reproduces the common Universe
of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward
sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being (qtd. in Swinfen, 9-10).

But it was Coleridge who most clearly set the terms for much of the early nineteenth-century discussion of the fantastic with his pointed distinction, in his 1817 *Biographia Literaria*, between “fancy” and “imagination,” which he had come to believe were “two distinct and widely different faculties, instead of being, according to the general belief, either two names with one meaning, or at furthest the lower and higher degree of one and the same power.” Echoing Blake, he argued that imagination was “the living Power and prime Agent of all human perception,” while the fancy “has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space” (156). Partly because of the influence of Coleridge, Shelley, and others, Stephen Prickett reports that by 1825, “From being terms of derision, or descriptions of daydreaming, words like ‘fantasy’ and ‘imagination’ suddenly began to take on new status as hurrah-words” (Prickett 6).

Yet this was not to last. The critic and encyclopedist John Clute argues that this growing distinction between the fantastic and other forms of literary representation would come back to haunt fantastic literature in an age that increasingly valued rationality. Clute claims that until about 1700, “we did not categorize works of art according to their use of (or failure to use) story elements that might be deemed unreal or impossible to realize in the world as normally perceived,” but that around that time “a fault line was drawn between mimetic work, which accorded with the rational Enlightenment values then beginning to dominate, and the great cauldron of irrational myth and story, which we now
claimed to have outgrown, and which was now deemed primarily suitable for children” (20-21). Moreover, Wolfe concurs, adding that,

Ironically, this devaluation, or at least devalorization, of the fantastic began at a time when the outlines of the modern popular genres of the fantastic were first being laid down in a series of seminal works: the Gothic novel and the stories of Poe provided a rough template for what would become horror fiction; Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (also derived largely from the Gothic, but with the crucial distinction that her protagonist rejected supernaturalism and alchemy in favor of experimental science) established many of the preconditions of science fiction; the extended fairy tale narratives of the German Romantics and their English imitators (which included Thackeray and Ruskin as well as MacDonald) first articulated the portaled alternate realities that became a key element of modern fantasy” (“Malebolge” 7).

Even as these genres began to take shape, they met with skepticism. Walter Scott, in his 1827 essay “On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition,” cautioned that fantastic elements should be “rare, brief, indistinct” and characterized by “philosophical reasoning and moral truth” (282). Scott himself had very nearly anticipated the division of the fantastic into subgenres in his famous 1818 review of *Frankenstein* (which he believed to have been written by Percy Shelley), in which he observed that “the class of marvellous romances admits of several subdivisions.”
In the earlier productions of imagination, the poet, or tale-teller does not, in his own opinion, transgress the laws of credibility, when he introduces into his narration the witches, goblins, and magicians, in the existence of which he himself, as well as his hearers, is a firm believer. This good faith, however, passes away, and works turning upon the marvellous are written and read merely on account of the exercise which they afford to the imagination of those who, like the poet Collins, love to riot in the luxuriance of oriental fiction, to rove through the meanders of enchantment, to gaze on the magnificence of golden palaces, and to repose by the water-falls of Elysian gardens. In this species of composition, the marvellous is itself the principal and most important object both to the author and reader. (Scott)

With *Frankenstein* and similar works, however, Scott makes a crucial exception:

In the class of fictitious narrations to which we allude, the author opens a sort of account-current with the reader; drawing upon him, in the first place, for credit to that degree of the marvellous which he proposes to employ; and becoming virtually bound, in consequence of this indulgence, that his personages shall conduct themselves, in the extraordinary circumstances in which they are placed, according to the rules of probability, and the nature of the human heart. In this view, the probable is far from being laid out of sight even amid the wildest freaks of imagination; on the contrary, we grant the extraordinary postulates which
the author demands as the foundation of his narrative, only on condition of his deducing the consequences with logical precision.

By granting the “extraordinary postulates” of a work of fantastic literature as long as the characters respond according to “the nature of the human heart,” Scott comes very close not only to acknowledging Mary Shelley’s avowed intentions in *Frankenstein*, but to recognizing the crucial distinction between the manner in which the fantastic is deployed in a work of science fiction and a work of pure fantasy.

Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the social and emotional relevance of the fantastic was met with skepticism by both English and American readers, and there are historical reasons why the emotional and artistic capacity of the fantastic has been devalued. One such reason is a growing rejection of the fantastic in the adult fiction of the Victorian era (despite a parallel blossoming of fantasy in children’s literature). In *Adam Bede* (1859), George Eliot wrote: “The pencil is conscious of a delightful facility in drawing a griffin—the longer the claws, and the larger the wings, the better; but that marvelous facility which we mistook for genius is apt to forsake us when we want to draw a real unexaggerated lion” (151). In other words, fantasy seemed at odds with the emerging aesthetic of domestic realism championed by Eliot and others, both in England and America, and Victorian criticism of fantasy often reflected this.
Contemporary Approaches to the Fantastic

This distinction between credibility and pure fancy has also characterized some of the most important theories of the fantastic in the twentieth century. One influential definition, that of the structuralist critic Tsvetan Todorov in his *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, has proved so narrow and schematic that later critics have found it of limited use, though it clearly echoes Scott’s distinctions. Todorov claims that the fantastic occurs when an event or being is encountered that “cannot be explained” by the laws of the familiar world; his examples include “devils, sylphides, or vampires.” The event may be resolved as an illusion, and the laws of the natural world are preserved, or it may be real, in which case the supernatural is confirmed. “The fantastic,” he writes, “occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25). But as Jackson points out, Todorov’s theory “fails to consider the social and political implications of literary forms. Its attention is confined to the effects of the text and the means of its operation” (6). Another influential critic, Eric S. Rabkin, observes that “Todorov radically limits not only Fantasy, but the fantastic to the realm of a single genre” (118), and defines that genre in such narrow terms as to exclude most of what is generally regarded as fantastic literature.

Other critical definitions of the fantastic are far broader in scope, and often seem to arrive at a kind of consensus. As Gary K. Wolfe has noted, citing several critics, “If
there is one thing the still-embryonic body of literary scholarship devoted to fantasy has made clear, it is that whatever we are to call ‘fantasy’ must first and foremost deal with the impossible” (“Encounter,” 1). Or as Brian Attebery has stated, fantasy is “any narrative which includes as a significant part of its makeup some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law” (*Fantasy Tradition* 2). But here we encounter a different problem, in that, while these definitions are useful in approaching the long tradition of fantastic and supernatural fiction which is commonly termed “fantasy” today, the last two centuries have seen the growth of allied genres, science fiction and horror, which need not violate “natural law” at all; in fact, most definitions of science fiction insist that it conforms to the scientific understanding of the world at the time of the author’s writing—which is a central reason that *Frankenstein* is often citing as a founding work of science fiction. Once regarded by many as a subset of fantasy, science fiction has come in for its own litany of definitions, but again with the common thread that the events depicted are at least *speculatively* possible, meaning they must not defy natural laws or scientific principles. A useful distinction is that made by science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein, who wrote, “When I say ‘fantasy fiction’ I shall mean ‘imaginary-and-not-possible in the world as we know it; conversely all fiction which I regard as ‘imaginary-but-possible’ I shall refer to as ‘realistic fiction,’ i.e., imaginary but could be real so far as we know the real universe. Science fiction is in the latter class. It is not fantasy” (18). Theorist Darko Suvin is equally emphatic that science fiction and fantasy are incompatible, arguing that while both genres share elements of estrangement, the “cognitive” aspect of science fiction “differentiates it not only from myth, but also from
the folk (fairy) tale and the fantasy.” (Suvin’s rather narrow purview for science fiction, which has become problematical in the wake of many postmodern narratives, renders his often-dismissive approach to fantasy less useful than his insights into classic science fiction.) Another noted science fiction writer, Isaac Asimov, defines science fiction as “that branch of literature which is concerned with the impact of scientific advance upon human beings” (159)—though it could be argued that Asimov’s definition is so broad as to include many historical or contemporary novels which deal with science.

A third modern genre associated with the fantastic, but which may or may not violate the accepted laws of nature (or consensus reality), is horror fiction, which, as Wolfe has noted, is “unusual in that it is labeled not according to its own conventions or structures, but according to its desired effect” (Critical Terms 53). This is an important observation, since the affect of horror may be a part of science fiction (as in Frankenstein, which is claimed by historians of both horror fiction and science fiction), supernatural fiction (as in Dracula), fantasy (as in “Goblin Market”), or even in nonfantastic thrillers (such as Thomas Harris’s The Silence of the Lambs, which was even nominated for a World Fantasy Award in 1989 despite its lack of overt fantastic content).

In a sense, horror is not a content-defined genre in the manner of science fiction or fantasy, but is certainly widely accepted as part of what critics such as R.D. Mullen and Eric S. Rabkin have (independently) termed the “supergenre” of fantastic literature. A term similar to “supergenre” has been suggested by the critic John Clute, who, adapting the Russian term fantastika, wrote, “Fantastika consists of that wide range of fictional works whose contents are understood to be fantastic” (20), that is, works whose intended
readership would regard them as fantastic. Clute’s broadly encompassing term certainly includes works as diverse as *Frankenstein*, “Goblin Market,” and *Dracula*, and it is this term I will be adopting for my purposes here.

**The Fantastic as Social Commentary**

Shelley, Rossetti, and Stoker were not by any means unique in anticipating these genres; they were building on currents of fantastika that had gone before, from the folktale to the Gothic novel. But their works were arguably crucial in helping to shift the terms of discussion of fantastika from *what it is* to *what it does*, and to create a coherent mode of literature that employed the emotional resonance of fantastika in the pursuit of understanding social problems. As we could readily see, from Walter Scott’s dismissive comment that “the marvellous is itself the principal and most important object” of such writing to George Eliot’s championing of the “real unexaggerated lion” and even to Darko Suvin’s dismissal of the fantastic for its own sake, there has been a persistent tendency to regard the fantastic as merely escapist or self-indulgent entertainment, intended largely for women or children, with little demonstrable relevance to actual social issues or conditions. Contrary to these common suppositions, Shelley, Rossetti, and Stoker provide powerful evidence that fantastic literature of various kinds could be crucially engaged with the central issues of its time. Their work demanded that fantastika be reconsidered, to some extent even reinvented, as a mode of social commentary. *Frankenstein* came during a time of increasing concern over the rise of experimental science and its ethical implications; “Goblin Market” addressed the growing and
problematical role of women and gender relations in Victorian society; *Dracula* addressed the fear of the Other that accompanied late nineteenth century patterns of immigration and, indirectly, imperialism. While many other works of the fantastic may have also addressed such concerns, these three seem of particular interest not only because they represent important cultural shifts at the beginning, middle, and end of the century, but also because the specific concerns they addressed remain remarkably relevant—and largely unresolved—even today. This is undoubtedly part of the reason for the continuing appeal of these three cornerstone works. Writing decades apart—near the beginning, middle, and end of the nineteenth century—and to some extent addressing different social and moral concerns, Shelley, Rossetti, and Stoker each demonstrate how elements of the fantastic may be deployed in the service of the pressing social and moral concerns of their day, moving persuasively beyond the simplistic view of the fantastic as mere children’s tales or entertaining diversions.

**The Fantastic and Character**

In order to more fully understand how these authors adapt the fantastic to address specific social issues such as education, the status of women, or the alien in Victorian society, we need also to explore some of the ways in which fantastic stories can address our own anxieties and infiltrate our very sense of self. Author Ursula K. Le Guin notes that realistic fiction is specific to the time and culture in which the story takes place, as well as to those in which it was written. Fantastika may be equally bound to the time and place of its composition, but its content is bounded only by the imagination. Reality is
shifty; fantasy is more constant—almost everyone understands dragons, or something like them, whether in Chinese legends, Victorian children’s tales, or contemporary movies.

Of course, the capacity to evoke alien times and places and states of mind—is equally crucial to mimetic literature, but fantastic literature teaches us that the possibilities for speculation are wide open; the figures it offers us—a surgically created monster, goblins, a vampire—are multivalent almost by nature, permitting multiple interpretations that can at once reflect on the social realities of the immediate culture and suggest a universal, almost mythic resonance. As we shall see in later chapters, the figures of Shelley’s Frankenstein’s monster, Rossetti’s goblins, and Stoker’s Dracula had much to say about the cultural matrix in which they were created, but these same figures have long outlived that matrix and become icons subject to almost constant reinvention and rediscovery for subsequent generations with their own problems. At some core level, these fantastic beings have become a kind of almost universal modern mythology, a lexicon of the imagination, in a way that more realistic figures, more clearly bound to their time and place, are not. Crucially, fantastika may address subjects not adequately covered by the vocabulary of the ordinary—or in some cases subjects the vocabulary of the ordinary dare not address directly.

But at the same time, characters in successful fantastic stories have to be realistic enough to be recognized as people, because to be effective, fantastic tales must work at the mimetic level as well as the mythical. The monsters may be fabulous, but the characters they affect must be credible. As Mar and Oatley note, “Even novels with
fantastical themes and settings (e.g., science-fiction or fantasy novels) strive for verisimilitude with respect to human emotions . . . A science-fiction novel that takes place on a distant space station may have greater psychological realism than does a pulpy novel set in modern times in a familiar locale” (185). We do require a frame of reference; the fantasy cannot be so alien in every respect that we have no way to get inside it. Some characters might be superior; they are the heroes. Some might be inferior; they are the comic relief. But credible character development can be as important to fantastic tales as to mimetic ones, and characters such as Victor Frankenstein, Count Dracula, and Van Helsing have proved so enduring that they still recur in fictions and films today.

Subjecting believable characters to extreme experience is another key means by which the fantastic can achieve its effect. If one grants that such extreme experience is unlikely or even impossible for most people, then fiction can provide a kind of surrogate experience. Certainly, the prospect of dealing with vampires, goblins, or monsters is the sort of experience few would wish upon themselves, but confronting such extremity in fiction can prove not only aesthetically satisfying, but can be, as Le Guin tells us, vital for gathering material to make meaningful progress in understanding the world, even when that fiction features bizarre or supernatural figures. Fantastic literature in particular offers us the opportunity to recognize familiar emotions and states of mind in the context of a radically estranged narrative, or of a world which is recognizably like our own and yet alien to us.

Farah Mendlesohn in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* writes of what she calls “intrusion fantasy,” in which the fantastic elements “intrude” into a recognizable domestic world.
Although *Frankenstein* is science fiction rather than fantasy, the rhetorical constructions Mendlesohn outlines still explain some of its mechanics, as well as those at work in Dracula and “Goblin Market.” In *Frankenstein*, the intruder is the monster Victor has created; in “Goblin Market” it is the band of “goblin men” in an otherwise domestic Victorian village; in *Dracula*, it is obviously the title figure himself. Mendlesohn writes of *Dracula*:

> Of particular interest here are not only the intense adjectives of feeling but something that is quite noticeable and, I think, particular to the intrusion fantasy. In this one paragraph[^3] is the entire trajectory of the intrusion fantasy; the sense of threat, of waiting, and of repulsion of the horror. The further we go into classic horror fiction, the more evident it is that the primary method of escalation is connected to an episodic structure in which the whole is made up of many *identical* parts. […] The denouement—the finding of the graves, the execution of the vampires—is masterly. Stoker escapes the sense of anticlimax because he builds delay and the possibility of delay into the event and again uses the escalation to create a moment at which the characters and readers reach a precipice of emotion. (Mendlesohn 130)

[^3]: “And so we remained till the red of the dawn began to fall through the snow gloom. I was desolate and afraid, and full of woe and terror. But when that beautiful sun began to climb the horizon life was to me again. At the first coming of the dawn the horrid figures melted in the whirling mist and snow. The wreaths of transparent gloom moved away towards the castle, and were lost” (qtd. in Mendlesohn 130).
The same kinds of delay and reprieve are built into the structure of *Frankenstein*, until Shelley shows Victor in a state of near nervous collapse in his anxiety and horror at what he has done, and fear that the creature has come for him:

‘My dear Victor,’ cried [Clerval], ‘what, for God’s sake, is the matter? Do not laugh in that manner. How ill you are! What is the cause of all this?’

‘Do not ask me,’ cried I, putting my hands before my eyes, for I thought I saw the dreaded spectre glide into the room; he can tell. Oh, save me!

Save me! I imagined that the monster seized me; I struggled furiously and fell down in a fit. (62)

In “Goblin Market” there is a similar pattern of lingering and hesitation—delay—before the full horror of Laura’s poisoning and decline, and then Lizzie’s horrifying encounter in the glen. Lizzie’s fear of and aversion to the goblin men is palpable:

“Oh,” cried Lizzie, “Laura, Laura,
You should not peep at goblin men.”

Lizzie cover’d up her eyes,
Cover’d close lest they should look;
“No,” said Lizzie: “No, no, no;
Their offers should not charm us,
Their evil gifts would harm us.”
She thrust a dimpled finger
In each ear, shut eyes and ran: (8-9)
When Laura does not listen to Lizzie, and falls prey to the goblin men and their addictive wares, she can no longer sleep; we see her fitfully tossing and turning, weeping, unable to find rest—realistic responses to an unrealistic experience.

*Dracula* is filled with similar examples, which Stoker uses to build an increasing atmosphere of dread; most of the major characters experience some major expression of horror, dread, or grief at least once. Perhaps the person most visibly affected by fear and dread is Jonathan Harker, who had been imprisoned by the Count earlier in the novel. When the Count arrives in England and Jonathan and Mina encounter him in the streets of London, Jonathan is nearly paralyzed with terror:

He was very pale, and his eyes seemed bulging out as, half in terror and half in amazement, he gazed at a tall, thin man, with a beaky nose and black moustache and pointed beard [...] Jonathan kept staring at him, till I was afraid he would notice. I feared he might take it ill, he looked so fierce and nasty. I asked Jonathan why he was disturbed, and he answered, evidently thinking that I knew as much about it as he did, "Do you see who it is?"

‘No, dear,’ I said. ‘I don't know him, who is it?’ His answer seemed to shock and thrill me, for it was said as if he did not know that it was me, Mina, to whom he was speaking. ‘It is the man himself!’

The poor dear was evidently terrified at something, very greatly terrified. I do believe that if he had not had me to lean on and to support him he would have sunk down. [...] Jonathan kept looking after him, and
said, as if to himself, ‘I believe it is the Count, but he has grown young.
My God, if this be so! Oh, my God! My God! If only I knew! If only I knew!’ (155)

As with Clerval in *Frankenstein*, Mina reflects the extreme state of Jonathan’s near-hysteria. Later, Mina herself experiences similar distress:

Van Helsing, Art, and I moved forward to Mrs. Harker, who by this time had drawn her breath and with it had given a scream so wild, so ear-piercing, so despairing that it seems to me now that it will ring in my ears till my dying day. For a few seconds she lay in her helpless attitude and disarray. Her face was ghastly, with a pallor which was accentuated by the blood which smeared her lips and cheeks and chin. From her throat trickled a thin stream of blood. Her eyes were mad with terror. Then she put before her face her poor crushed hands, which bore on their whiteness the red mark of the Count's terrible grip, and from behind them came a low desolate wail which made the terrible scream seem only the quick expression of an endless grief. (247)

Significantly, all of these instances of delay and repetition—a technique that might be used in any number of traditional realistic narratives—involves glimpsing monstrous things that do not belong in our world, or the worlds of the protagonists. The characters react realistically to unrealistic things, to the “intrusions” of which Mendlesohn writes, and they all illustrate Walter Scott’s dictum that in such tales, “personages shall conduct themselves, in the extraordinary circumstances in which they are placed, according to the
rules of probability, and the nature of the human heart.” In other words, the delay and repetition technique gains added impact as we realize that what is finally to be confronted is not merely monstrous, but something that challenges our very conception of what is possible in our world, that threatens to subvert our own sense of reality.

The Fantastic as Subversion

Jackson described fantasy as “the literature of subversion,” arguing that through its expression of unconscious drives and anxieties it has consistently reflected moments of cultural unease and dislocation. As we noted earlier, critics such as George Eliot distrusted the fantastic, and for much of the nineteenth century it was relegated to children’s literature or escapist novels of entertainment, in a literary landscape that valued domestic realism. More than a century after Eliot, Ursula Le Guin could still write:

American readers and writers of fiction may yearn for the pure veracity of Jewitt or Dreiser, as the English may look back with longing to the fine solidities of Arnold Bennett; but the societies in and for which those novelists wrote were limited and homogeneous enough to be described in a language that could seriously pretend to describe, in Trollope’s phrase, “the way we live now.” The limits of that language—shared assumptions of class, culture, education, ethics—both focus and shrink the scope of the fiction.
In other words, according to Le Guin, the very idea of fantastika seemed at odds with, and potentially subversive of, the dominant social realist aesthetic of Trollope’s era. Le Guin goes on to argue that

Society in the decades around the second millennium, global, multilingual, enormously irrational, undergoing incessant radical change, is not describable in a language that assumes continuity and a common experience of life. And so writers have turned to the global, intuitive language of fantasy to describe, as accurately as they can, the way “we” live “now.” (44)

But in fact, though Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was hardly as multicultural as the internet-connected, economically globalized world we inhabit now, it was not quite as homogeneous as Le Guin describes, and was beginning to suffer its own fractures and dislocations. There were migrations of populations within the kingdom and influxes from without; many small landholders had been compelled to seek new ways of living due to the effects of enclosure between 1750 and the 1830s, and those who had made their living by cultivating the “wastes” and commons were forced to hire out for day labor, or move to the towns. In an ongoing process lasting into the 1880s, farmers were injured further by natural conditions; in south-eastern England, weather and imported wheat required poorer farmers to allow land to go to uncultivated (Royle 1-4). Science made leaps forward, threatening the hold of religion on the intellectual life of the people; the Empire waxed great and declined, accompanied by the brushfires of colonial rebellion. The first wave of feminism as a movement began, with Mary Wollstonecraft
and her now-classic *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Judith Flanders claims that it was this dynamism that led the Victorians, by mid-century, to concentrate on the home as a “still center” in a society that must have felt like a political and social hurricane. She writes that “changes—particularly technological changes—meant that the desire for stasis was almost ludicrous in its hopelessness” (5). Such was “the way we live now” for much of the Victorian period; the “shared assumptions” Le Guin mentions were already being tested under such unsettling changes in British society, and Shelley, Rossetti, and Stoker were prominent among those writers who turned to the “intuitional language of fantasy” to address and critique such an unstable environment.

In sum, during the nineteenth century cultural experience was beginning to splinter, as people tried to keep pace with events. That’s one reason writers as disparate as Dickens, Lewis Carroll, and Bulwer-Lytton started using the fantastic to explore these cultural crises. It must have seemed the most forceful way to get a message through the noise. The fantastic is deliberately illusory, outside the fragmented realm of lived experience, and thus equally accessible to a wide variety of readers.

More specifically, what led these three writers, in their places and times, to discover the subversive potential of fantastic tales? For one thing, previous literary movements had prepared the way, the Gothic novel in the case of *Frankenstein*, the popular fairy tale in the case of *Goblin Market*, the novel of sensation in the case of *Dracula*. Furthermore, each of these authors was at or near the center of dynamic literary movements which helped shape the cultural dialogue of the time. Shelley was an intimate of some of the Romantics (not least her husband) and the child of two famous activists;
Rossetti was a central figure in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (or her brother was; she was somewhat excluded because she was a woman); Stoker was involved in the theater as the personal assistant and friend of Henry Irving, and was, as a friend of Oscar Wilde, linked to fin de siècle decadence. There was, in other words, a significant public dimension to each author’s life; put simply, they were in positions to be heard. Furthermore, each author represented a crucial moment of transition between older and newer forms, as the Gothic began to give way to science fiction, fairy tales to fantasy, the novel of sensation to the modern horror tale.

Also important were the social and economic conundra evident in the works of Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and Christina Rossetti: the conflict between science and theology, the importance of moral education, the deep unease about the roiling unrest throughout the British Empire, and the question of the woman’s place in society. These issues gripped the collective mentality of Great Britain, and so these authors as well. None of them suggested specific solutions, but they used the fantastic to package and problematize their concerns, with figures that became so iconic that they remain popular today.

In the context of their time, all three of the texts to be discussed are notoriously complex, with layers of meaning that render almost any single-minded readings arguable. These fantastical narratives present riddles and complexities that are meant, like Umberto Eco’s enigmatically titled novel The Name of the Rose, to “muddle the reader’s ideas, not regiment them” (Postscript 3). What is happening when a reader encounters a slippery idea or an impossible, fantastical situation is that previous frames of reference begin to
disintegrate, so that assumptions regarding the moral center or meaning of the work are called into question. Eco may have put it best when he wrote that “A narrator should not supply interpretations of his work; otherwise he would have not written a novel, which is a machine for generating interpretations” (Postscript 1-2). Based on the mass of wildly varied critical commentary, such a statement would seem to apply equally well to *Frankenstein*, “Goblin Market,” and *Dracula*. And it is worth noting that fantasy writers themselves, from George MacDonald to Ursula K. Le Guin, have argued against the simplistic reading of fantastic stories as mere allegories, rather than more complex human narratives open, like mimetic fiction, to multiple interpretations, or even as “interpretation-generating machines.”

As we have seen, a fair amount has been written about how fantastic narratives work at the theoretical level, as part of our metacognitive discourse. But there is also something more visceral than simple cognitive dissonance, and it has much to do with the extreme emotional states we have been discussing. Scott’s notion that the reactions of characters in a fantastic tale should be consistent with “the nature of the human heart” takes on a somewhat different meaning when these characters are subjected to the sorts of extreme experience frequently depicted in such works—confrontations with monsters of one’s own creation, with seductive goblins, with vampires that threaten one’s very identity. In order for such fantastic beings to become emotionally credible, they must first be “domesticated” in the sense that H.G. Wells would use the term later in the nineteenth century. Domestication of the impossible, in Wells’s sense, means grounding the
narrative not only in the emotional reality of the human characters, but in recognizable or even familiar places and times.

A contemporary example may help illustrate this point: the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a clear modern descendant of Stoker’s *Dracula*. That this program engaged a variety of contemporary social issues has been well documented in a surprisingly large body of academic work on the series, as has the extended “high school is hell” metaphor (Little 282). This familiar high school setting, along with the fun and excitement, attracted viewers, while the metaphoric elements allowed viewers to reflect, as we mentioned earlier, on subjects not adequately covered by the vocabulary of the ordinary. *Buffy* suggests that we are still so disturbed by some of the nastier possibilities of modern adolescence that invoking the supernatural is the only way to express the depth of the horror and confusion. In the Season Two episode “Lie to Me,” a teenaged boy called Billy Fordham, dying of cancer, wants so much to live that he is prepared to become a vampire, to sacrifice not only what remains of himself, but the lives of the people he sold to a vampire gang, and those on whom he would have fed (had he survived after rising from his grave). He saw himself as the lead in a romantic tragedy, a predisposition Aaron Beck characterizes as “the tendency to perceive ourselves as the lead actor of a play and to judge other people's behavior exclusively in reference to ourselves” (27)—common enough among modern teenagers. The question to ask ourselves, according to Beck, is if Buffy’s behavior toward Billy was compassionate and understanding, how can we define and characterize her other possible paths of reaction? She could have simply killed him, to stop him, or she could have let him go because his
life and death were indeed tragic. Either course of action would have been immoral, according to Buffy’s ethical code: she can’t murder him while he is still human, nor can she allow him to become a predatory vampire whose actions will lead to other deaths. Afterward, Buffy and her mentor Giles sit in a dark graveyard waiting for Billy to rise as a vampire so that Buffy can lay him to rest permanently. After Buffy stakes Billy, she asks Giles whether life ever gets any easier. Her dilemma effectively uses the supernatural to cast in stark relief the sort of moral conundrum that adolescents like Buffy are only beginning to confront, while at the same time offering the reader some distance by presenting a situation which is cognitively impossible in the “real” world, yet quite convincing in terms of emotional reality.

An episode of the TV series *Angel*, a direct spinoff of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, provides another good example of this emotional reality in the context of fantastic events. In “Deep Down,” written by Steven DeKnight, one of the heroes remarks, “Nothing in the world is the way it ought to be. It's harsh, and cruel. But that's why there's us. Champions. It doesn't matter where we come from, what we've done or suffered, or even if we make a difference. We live as though the world was what it should be, to show it what it can be”—a sentiment that might as well have been expressed by the Crew of Light in *Dracula*, and in fact does directly echo Stefan Beyst, who writes that we have a “desire to remould the real world according to our image and likeness: we fancy it more beautiful or more ugly, more transparent or more opaque, more rosy or more gloomy, more funny or more tragic, more cosy or more abhorrent.” This is what *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* set out to accomplish: a metaphoric simulation of the world, full of
demons and darkness, hope and heroism—and much the same might be said of
Frankenstein, “Goblin Market,” and Dracula, each of which introduces an intrusion of
the fabulous into a familiar world, thus inviting us to re-vision the terms of that world.

The first step for any writer of fantastic tales, then, is to present the central vision
in a compelling way, to offer readers a “mental representation of things not actually
present” so that they (we) “can form a judgment of what world we live in and where we
might be going in it, what we can celebrate, what we must fear” (Le Guin 45). How
Shelley, Rossetti, and Stoker accomplished this in their different times, with different
modes of writing, and addressing different social concerns—but always using the
fantastic to reflect and illuminate real-world anxieties—is what I will explore in the
following chapters.
Chapter One

Fantasy, Epistemology, and History

The specific works of fantastic literature that we are concerned with here reflected and responded to a complex conjunction of social and political forces in nineteenth-century Britain that seemed to demand fusion and transformation. Facing divisive issues—science versus theology, the role of women in society, the shifting role of the British Empire in world affairs—British society had to adjust and transform itself. With science and technology revolutionizing the lives of farmers and city-dwellers alike, and revising the basic understanding of nature, what might the consequences be? If Britain could no longer make a rich living from her colonies, how would she prosper? If, in Mary Wollstonecraft’s words, the “specious homage” paid to women by men was no good for either, what was the actual role of women? Faced with these and other unsettling questions, as we noted earlier, society was seeking methods to cope with these rapid transformations. It may be no coincidence that nineteenth-century Britain also saw a blossoming of fantastic literature in a variety of forms, from the fairy tales of George MacDonald, John Ruskin, and Charles Kingsley to the linguistic and mathematical inventions of Lewis Carroll, the sensational horror stories of the penny dreadfuls, and the
proto-science fiction of novels like Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1871) or George Chesney’s *The Battle of Dorking* (1871). It is the contention of this thesis that some such works, far from representing a flight or escape from the social issues of the day, were in fact deeply engaged with such issues in a way that would alter and transform the possibilities and uses of the fantastic as a literary mode.

*Frankenstein*, “Goblin Market,” and *Dracula* are exemplary texts in this movement, not only because of their popularity and their endurance, but because of the specific manner in which they employ the subversive and critical aspects of fantastic as a means of interrogating sensitive social anxieties. Furthermore, each prefigures in significant ways what would eventually come to be recognized as three principal subgenres or modalities of modern fantastic literature—science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Each of these subgenres can arguably be said to have at least part of their roots in the social crises of nineteenth century such as those mentioned above, and in the multifaceted response of writers of fantastika to these crises.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*, is a fully realized science fiction novel, with Victor’s actions investigating the question of how far scientists should pursue knowledge. Despite his lofty aims and good intentions, the result of his hubris is mixed: his creation has the capacity for great good and great evil, like many later science fiction inventions from robots to superweapons. But while much has been written about Shelley’s use of the science of her day in describing the construction of her iconic creature, or of Victor’s own decision to reject earlier forms of alchemical learning in favor of the emerging experimental sciences, far less attention has been paid
to his own failures as an educator and mentor for his creation. *Frankenstein* pointedly raises the crucial question of the importance of moral education in scientific progress, and it is my contention here that this concern with moral education is central to the novel’s identity as a work of science fiction.

Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” is notorious for its multiple layers of meaning. Scholars have approached the work as a fairy tale, as a children’s poem, and as an allegory. But when considered in terms of more recent theoretical approaches to fantasy theory, “Goblin Market” presents a complex series of subversive ideas while studiously avoiding the appearance of an open threat to the dominant social order. Not only does it present a sharp criticism of her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and his dominance over her career, but it uses this concern to open out into a more fundamental critique of one of the key emerging tensions of its era, the role of women in society. In so doing, it prefigures the emergence of the significant twentieth-century subgenre of feminist fantasy narratives, which often adopt wholesale Rossetti’s pioneering use of fairy tale materials to interrogate issues of gender and female identity.

Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* touches on all three fault lines—gender, science and faith, and imperialism—and is a pioneering work in the evolution of modern literary horror fiction from its more sensational Gothic roots. Feminist ideas, the function of faith, and the threat to empire in the form of dark, threatening strangers are all important

4 All of the works in this dissertation are works of the fantastic, but only “Goblin Market” is cast directly as fantasy. This distinction is important.
subthemes—as they are, in perhaps subtler ways in *Frankenstein* and “Goblin Market.”
The contrast between Mina Harker and Lucy Westenra and their relationships with the male characters echoes the continuing debate over women’s roles in society. The use of both technology and faith in the fight against the monstrous Count Dracula frames the debate over the value of both. Finally, the wild, dangerous foreigner from the dark, mysterious East represents the perceived menace from everything outside the circle of British knowledge and control, and is a key early example of what Mendelsohn calls the “intrusion fantasy”—one in which the fantastic invades the familiar world rather than the characters travelling to a marvelous realm or inhabiting a fully-realized secondary world. This has become the characteristic mode of modern horror fiction whether it involves vampires, zombies, werewolves, or demonic possessions, but few before Stoker saw the possibility of using such figures as a means of addressing social issues, and few before or since have so successfully integrated complex characters and closely realized settings with the terrifying supernatural intrusions.

In sum, Shelley, Stoker, and Rossetti deliberately chose the tools of the fantastic to address the profound and wide-ranging social insecurities at work in England during the nineteenth century. These writers recognized that unadorned, literal sermonizing of the sort characteristic of the more homiletic fiction of the time was simply not as effective as the intrinsically subversive rhetorical strategies of the fantastic tale. The three emerging genres associated with these works—fantasy, science fiction, and horror—later began to develop into literatures of insubordination, by provoking debate over the critical
issues of the time and suggesting the possibility of social (and even biological) change on a previously unimagined scale.

The Mechanisms of the Fantastic

Fantastic elements, paradoxically, can be some of the most effective tools for dealing with reality—in this case, the concrete conditions and controlling ideologies of nineteenth-century British society. The ideologies under challenge included humanity’s place in the universe (secularization), Britain’s place in the world (imperialism), and women’s place in society (gender relations). Works such as *Frankenstein,* *Dracula,* and "Goblin Market," far from being merely popular entertainments, were crafted to capture the public imagination and stimulate readers to question the social order in a manner quite different from that of the realistic novel of social reform, by invoking figures that associated the immediate anxieties of the day with more archetypal and universal symbolic figures. In so doing, Mary Shelley, Christina Rossetti, and Bram Stoker, among others, vastly extended and redefined the possible literary uses of the fantastic, which, as noted earlier, had been widely viewed as escapist diversions or literature for children.

The critical literature on fantastic fiction, as we noted in the Introduction, is wide-ranging and enormous, but one common thread is that these genres have “always been” the literature of questioning and exploration. Part of my argument is that this is too easy an assumption, and the question of how specific fantastic works have engaged in social commentary has been treated only in stray sentences here and there in works generally focused elsewhere, often on the formal aspects of the narratives or the conventions of the
genres involved. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the manner in which fantastic texts interacted with their cultural and social contexts, and even less to the manner in which the authors of such texts—often dismissed as mere entertainment—critique and even subvert widely accepted attitudes. In particular reference to Shelley, Rossetti, and Stoker, no other studies have pursued the specific ways that these three texts helped lay bare, through fantastic events and beings, important crisis issues at specific moments in British social history.

To explore how these authors develop such strategies, we might look briefly at such traditional literary devices as suspense and metaphor. Caroline Levine argues that many nineteenth-century writers developed the use of suspense as a vehicle for a radical new epistemological approach. For these writers, “the experience of suspense was…a rigorous epistemological training, a way to foster energetic skepticism and uncertainty rather than closure and complacency” (2). She writes, “as we read suspenseful plots, we learn to doubt and guess, to speculate and hypothesize, to pause in the knowledge that we do not know” (3). Fantastic narratives build not only on traditional narrative suspense, but on the reader’s awareness that the narrative may shift the basic ground rules by introducing elements from outside the traditional realistic representation of lived

\[\text{(5) Stephanie Moss (former IAFA Division Head for Horror) also points out in an e-mail (dated 09/16/05) to Farah Mendlesohn (former IAFA President) that in the vampire genre as it developed in the nineteenth century, skepticism was the originating context which the vampire was able to exploit, and that in contemporary horror the characters frequently revert to skepticism despite everything they have experienced.}\]
experience. They explore and expand the possibilities and pitfalls of knowledge and power. Fantastic narratives force readers to reconsider what may be possible, to speculate on the morality and repercussions of human action, and sometimes to pause at the realization that no one knows exactly what is and what is not possible. In science fiction, this speculation characteristically revolves around what is scientifically credible. This is certainly true of Frankenstein, but the more interesting question which Shelley raises is not what we can do, but what we should do, and who bears responsibility for the consequences of such actions. Shelley’s deepest concern is not merely for what is possible, but for what is moral. Extrapolative fiction forces readers to confront the human consequences of scientific discoveries not yet realized, and of the ethics of scientific investigation in general.

Moving beyond such particular narrative strategies as suspense, George Lakoff and Mark Turner suggest that metaphor is fundamental to language and cognition. They write that “using the capacities we all share, poets can illuminate our experience, explore the consequences of our beliefs, challenge the ways we think, and criticize our ideologies” (xi). If one accepts a definition of metaphor as an image that is not literally real, but analogous to reality, then fantastic literature can be thought of as “a single metaphor writ large.” As Lakoff and Turner write, “life as a journey” is one of the most all-encompassing metaphors we employ in everyday communication, but authors of fantastic literature can extend that metaphor into journeys to other worlds or states of being—a visit to the Goblin Market, for example, or a pursuit across uncharted arctic wastelands in Frankenstein. They can use the unreal to represent all possible worlds—a
phrase used by Jerome Bruner in his book *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, in which he writes, “once we have characterized a text in terms of its structure, its historical context, its linguistic form, its genre, its multiple levels of meaning, and the rest, we may still wish to discover how and in what ways the text affects the reader, and indeed, what produces such effects on the reader as do occur” (4). One seemingly obvious means of producing such effects is described by Richard and Bernice Lazarus, who write “everything important that happens to us arouses emotion [and] if the author develops themes of importance, the audience appreciates it as relevant to their own lives” (3-6).

This study seeks to explore how the authors of *Frankenstein*, “Goblin Market,” and *Dracula* used fantastical elements to achieve such effects on readers, and how these effects relate to questions of social and individual morality. Together, Levine’s theory of the function of suspense and the Lazaruses’ discussion of the role of affect suggest that a narrative can evoke considerable suspense even through events outside normal human experience. Writer Ursula K. Le Guin and critic Brian Attebery, among others, extend Lakoff and Turner’s theory that metaphor is indispensable to thought, claiming that fantasy as a literary mode develops metaphor into a universal language of narrative rather than a mere poetic device.

Martha Nussbaum’s essay “Love’s Knowledge” sets forth a case for the value of literature and the function of emotion and imagination in the formation of morality and

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6 The essay “Love’s Knowledge” is part of a collection of essays also titled *Love’s Knowledge*. 
social change. She discusses the Platonic view of knowledge and, in contrast, how emotional crisis can create learning: Proust “uses the analogy of a chemical reaction: suffering is the catalyst that precipitates out the elements that, a moment before, could not have been discerned by the clearest vision” (255). The Romantics emphasized strong emotions—such as wonder, horror, and apprehension—as actual sources of experience. In the first half of the nineteenth century, that idea of emotional experience leading to knowledge evolved into something else, in the form of suspense novels, in which tension is generated by incomplete knowledge and resolved by information—the classic “what will happen next?” of nearly all contemporary mysteries and thrillers. Nussbaum writes “Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth” (Love’s Knowledge 3). In other words, the form that fiction takes is itself an epistemological choice. There is little doubt that these writers knew the value of fiction as a tool for the treatment of profound subjects. Nussbaum suggests “there may be some views of the world…that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder…” (Love’s Knowledge 3).

Fantastika often uses language and traditional literary devices such as metaphor differently from mimetic fiction. Science fiction, for example, as many critics including Ursula K. Le Guin have noted, can quite directly literalize metaphor (“her world exploded”), and would later become known for precisely what the expositional language of philosophy lacks: a “sense of wonder.” In 1989, writing of fantastic literature in
particular, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim made a similar observation in his study of the psychology of fairytales in *The Uses of Enchantment*, providing one hypothesis about how narratives act on the unconscious, influencing readers below the threshold of awareness. Fairytales “convey at the same time overt and covert meanings… [which] speak simultaneously to all levels of the human personality” (5). The writers of *Frankenstein, Dracula,* and “Goblin Market” perceived these potential uses of the fantastic in literature, deploying not only traditional suspense as a narrative technique, but apprehension and horror as well; they recognized that the fantastic mode could be not only a tool to transcend traditional narrative boundaries, but a unique way of calling attention to crucial social issues.

The specific social impact that such fantastic texts can achieve is perhaps best explained by Richard Lazarus’s cognitive appraisal theory of emotion, which shows how specific perceptions and judgments (of self, other, and world) produce specific emotions, which in turn entail a particular tendency toward action. For example, Lazarus writes in *Emotion and Adaptation* that we experience anger if we see someone assaulting a helpless person, like a child (220). Of course, fiction writers have known since time immemorial that placing innocents in danger is an almost irresistible “hook” for a reader, and children or young adults are assaulted and harmed in all three of my primary texts. In

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7 Which we now know to have been drawn heavily from the work of other psychologists, most specifically Dr. Julius E. Heuscher.
“Fantastic literature,” writes Attebery, referring precisely to the kinds of affect we have been discussing, “is full of ‘loaded’ images, concrete emblems of problematic or valuable psychological and social phenomena” (7). But its metaphors are not locked into a specific allegorical framework, with handy equals signs to overdetermine their meaning (a point repeatedly argued by fantasy writers themselves, from George MacDonald to
Ursula K. Le Guin). But that in turn leads to questions of how to properly read these works in context. Is Shelley’s *Frankenstein* an examination of science and education as I and others have claimed, a “critique of ideology” as David Collings suggests, or a Promethean re-visioning of *Paradise Lost*—itself a story of hubris, in part—as asserted by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (230)? The text would seem to support all three readings, as well as many others, since its metaphors are multivalent and thus broadly adaptable.

D.E. Meyers’s notion of overlapping hierarchies and shifting focus in literary texts, adapted from linguist Kenneth Pike’s theory of tagmemics—a small subfield of linguistics stressing the importance of context, overlapping hierarchies, and point of view—is critical to understanding any work of literature, but is of particular interest in the literature of fantastika, which may feature figures and events with no direct correlates in “real life.” For instance, in *Frankenstein*, the focus shifts between Shelley’s framing narrative, Victor’s story, and the creature’s story. Different readings, which sometimes struggle to find unity in all of the disparate aspects and narratives of the novel, do so unnecessarily. As non-literal fantastic texts, *Frankenstein*, “Goblin Market,” and *Dracula*

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are above all *interpretable*, “part of a polysemic discourse . . . vulnerable to a multiplicity of interpretations” (Mendlesohn, *Cambridge Companion* 10). Several readings can be valid at the same time, even if they seem to conflict—or, as Umberto Eco’s Brother William of Baskerville says, “books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry” (316). This is especially true of the fantastic, which often depends on figures and situations outside the realm of our lived experience but well within range of our emotions.

Readers interrogate texts by a sort of triangulation; we find points of congruence between ourselves and the characters in novels and poems, and parallels between their circumstances and our own. Though none of us have been terrorized by goblins, vampires, or the vengeful results of our scientific experiments, we all have faced temptation, anxiety, or the unintended consequences of our own actions. Fantastic literature gives us realistic people dealing with larger-than-life difficulties; by embodying these fears and giving them will, these authors gave their protagonists something concrete and visible to confront. Even such a materialist as Karl Marx used a hint of the fantastic to help his readers visualize his arguments. In *Wage Labor and Capital*, the relationship between capitalists and workers is presented as an extended metaphor of a medieval society, from the feudal lord on down—much as in modern epic fantasy. His metaphor extends into the fantastic as far as the gods of the netherworld (217), who represent the concepts served by capitalists. His economic models were much easier to grasp when reified and presented as embodied constructs, rather than as the abstractions “wage labour” and “working class.”
Few naturalistic fictions can so literalize the sheer intensity of our inner lives; the monstrous and fantastic can take readers to deeper places, giving shapes and names to our best hopes and our darkest fears, events whose overwhelming reality can only be expressed by the unreal. Like much fiction, these fantasies explore questions of good and evil, and our place in the struggle between the two. But by embodying this archetypal notion of good and evil in fantastical larger-than-life figures, and relating these to particular social issues, these stories require us to consider the nuances that lie between these two simple polarities. We may see in Count Dracula a figure of unremitting evil, but can we be so quick to judge either Victor Frankenstein or his creation, each of whom are far more morally ambiguous? When we posit what lies at the furthest reaches of human experience, when we decide what ought to be, and what is within our power to bring it about, we form our own concepts of ethical or moral behavior.

Fiction, of course, is filled with these moral conflicts, allowing a kind of rehearsal, and perhaps a hedge against the shocks of the unexpected. But fantastika in particular allows us to extrapolate both the unthinkable and the unanticipated. The influential American psychologist David L. Rosenhan speculates that if moral education is to be useful, its main function “will be in anticipatory avoidance” (934). He goes on to say that any program aimed at moral education will also tempt students to transgress, and will demonstrate good and powerful examples, and terrible threats: in other words, make them feel, give them heroes, show them villains, and compel them to think. As any good teacher can attest, coming to a conclusion on one’s own pierces far more deeply than
simply being told what to think by someone else, and is thus more likely to influence behavior.

Early antecedents of fantasy and science fiction, from John Bunyan to Jonathan Swift, may have been deeply invested in simply developing moral lessons or critiquing behavior—presenting us with characters and places that were clearly either allegorical or satirical—but by the nineteenth century writers were beginning to discover far more complex uses of the fantastic. Subsets within the fantastic function differently and achieve their effects by somewhat different means, but the greatest advantage of the fantastic as developed in the nineteenth century is that it shatters the reader’s frame of reference, going beyond the normal framework of the possible, but without necessarily providing direct one-to-one analogues to the real world in the manner of satire or allegory; to read such works as *Frankenstein*, “Goblin Market,” or *Dracula* as allegories is to reduce their emotional range to a single dimension.

The social and historical realities which Shelley, Stoker, and Rossetti addressed were present throughout the century and earlier, ebbing and resurging, but never going away, and they have not yet gone away today—which perhaps helps account for their enduring popularity. I have focused on a different social issue for each of the three authors under discussion, but there is significant overlap; none of the works is limited to a single social problem or agenda. Crucially, themes of gender and religion figure in all three, and the role of science in the two novels. The intractability of these problems is reflected in the texts: note that Frankenstein’s creature, the goblin men, and Count Dracula are never decisively conquered; they only retreat, after giving the heroes some
wounds to lick (Stoker, in fact, made a conscious decision not to publish the version of Dracula in which the castle explodes at the end, which would have implied that the Count had been definitively vanquished).

The Psychology of the Fantastic Tale

For at least the past quarter-century, a number of psychologists have noted that fantasy, at least in the psychological sense, is important to our mental equilibrium. As summarized by Deborah O’Keefe, for example, “Bruner argues that for a child learning to deal with the world outside the self, emotional growth is as important as intellectual; becoming a rational being is not enough. Stories, particularly fantasy stories, teach people how to “subjunctivize”—how to go beyond their personal selves and the actualities of their everyday reality, and explore all kinds of human possibilities” (19-20). This leads to the question of how to best extend that insight to literary criticism, and particularly to criticism of the fantastic. For many, fantastika is largely the realm of popular movies and genre fiction, just as many Victorians viewed it as the realm of children’s stories and cheap novels of sensation. Yet, far from dismissing such works as merely popular, might it not be more profitable for the critic and scholar to explore why they are popular, and (in the case of the works I am discussing here) why they remain popular for generations after their original publication? In the case of Frankenstein and Dracula in particular, the titles themselves have become nearly universal icons of popular culture, recognizable by children who have never heard of Shelley or Stoker and
surviving countless adaptations and variations seeking to capitalize on that iconic power even while sometimes committing unconscionable violence to the original texts.

If reading in general can make us more emotionally literate or improve what has sometimes been termed our “EQ” by presenting emotional states and circumstances beyond the reader’s experience, then literature in the fantastic mode can stretch that imaginative capacity further yet. Not even realistic fiction can entirely put a reader inside someone else’s skin, but it can draw attention to differences between the reader and characters and construct scenarios and settings which readers can map onto their own experience. Fantastic fiction expands the boundaries of the playing field to encompass the alien and monstrous, the magical and the marvelous, and to invoke those types of emotions that one might have difficulty acknowledging in a more mundane setting.

Imagination, writes Derrida, “is the freedom that reveals itself only in its works. These works do not exist within nature, but neither do they inhabit a world other than ours” (6). This is as true of fantastic works as realistic ones, except that fantastic works arguably can extend and challenge our notions both of what is possible in nature and in the world we inhabit.

In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Jackson argues that fantasy is also “a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss”:

In expressing desire, fantasy can operate in two ways (according to the different meanings of ‘express’): it can tell of, manifest or show desire (expression in the sense of portrayal, representation, manifestation, linguistic utterance, mention, description), or it can expel desire, when this
desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity (expression in the sense of pressing out, squeezing, expulsion, getting rid of something by force). In many cases fantastic literature fulfils both functions at once, for desire can be ‘expelled’ through having been ‘told of’ and thus vicariously experienced by author and reader. In this way fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’ (3-4).

As Jackson implies with her reference to “that which has been silenced,” fantastic literature is often by its very nature a form of ideological criticism. At its most directly satirical it presents us with dystopias and utopias or science fictional speculation; at its most abstract end, there may only be the formal shape of the story or a kind of dream vision, but even that is, in Jackson’s terms, a questioning of the cultural order. Even the shape, or type, of the story may represent an attempt to remold the world. Frankenstein, “Goblin Market,” and Dracula all allude to and to some extent subvert and repurpose earlier forms—the Gothic novel, the fairy story, the novel of sensation—and all certainly have human meanings and ideological agendas. In each we are led to believe that there is a right thing to do, though the authors may not make it explicit what that may be. The reader is clearly meant to adopt a moral stance, to sort out the moral ambiguities and
make choices. Mendlesohn writes that fantasy desperately wants the universe to be moral 
(Diana Wynne Jones xv). As with all fiction, there is always an ideology in fantastic 
fiction, however occult, abstract, or unacknowledged; there is always rhetoric, for the 
reader is always meant to believe, or see something, and usually to see it from an 
unexpected angle which may, and usually does, evoke “that which has been silenced, 
made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’.”

Toni Morrison, whose own work stands as a monument to the subversive 
potential of tale-telling and who herself has not hesitated to employ the fantastic as a 
narrative device, has said that stories are the most effective way to preserve and pass on 
knowledge. Her acceptance speech for the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature began, 
“Narrative has never been merely entertainment for me. It is, I believe, one of the 
principal ways in which we absorb knowledge." And then she said, “Once upon a 
time…” (7).
Chapter Two
Mary Shelley: Education as Science Fiction

The British novelist and critic Brian W. Aldiss once cleverly defined science fiction as “Hubris clobbered by nemesis” (26), and he might well have taken that formulation directly from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which Aldiss argued was the seminal work of modern science fiction. Subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*, *Frankenstein* is a fully realized science fiction novel, and as such represents a watershed moment in the history of fantastic literature. Earlier novels may have represented cosmic voyages or idealized communities, but few even touched upon the possible consequences of the rapidly developing experimental sciences, or to offer a reasonably credible portrait of a practicing scientist, with its attendant potential for disaster. Victor Frankenstein’s actions not only raise the question of how far scientists should pursue knowledge, but the possible unintended consequences of that knowledge—both issues that were increasingly the topic of intellectual debate during the rise of experimental science in the post-Enlightenment era. Victor begins with lofty aims and good intentions, but ultimately fails not through his shortcomings as a scientist, but through his abandonment of moral responsibility, particularly in regard to the education and development of his creation. Shelley leaves the question of the monster’s nature subject to debate, which makes the
novel, among many other things, a powerful educational tool. (Sofia Samatar, a writer who spent a decade teaching English as a Second Language to students in the Sudan, reported that of all English-language texts, only an edited-down version of *Frankenstein* riveted their attention.) And as we shall see, education itself—not only Victor’s, but that of his creation—is an important but often undervalued theme in the novel.

Mary Shelley began writing *Frankenstein* when she was eighteen years old. All of her writing, public and private, reveals a woman of passion who began writing at a volatile age, in a volatile age. Shelley spent her late teens absorbing her activist mother’s works and discussing literature with her poet lover; her most important influences were personal and political (MacDonald and Scherf 12). She must have felt the tensions of the age, and under the influences of Romantic poets like Byron and Percy Shelley,¹⁰ who often preferred to evoke emotions rather than describe them, she wrote the work that captures the fear, horror, and yearning of the early nineteenth century and which, according to Aldiss and others, established the groundwork for the modern genre of science fiction.

*Frankenstein* was part of what Nicholas Daly refers to as a discourse of national crisis, or anxiety, reflected in much British literature of the nineteenth century. To understand how it reflects this discourse we must first understand the location and nature of the science in the novel. Victor may be a brilliant scientist and surgeon in the

¹⁰ Hereafter, references to “Shelley” mean Mary Shelley.
researches that led to his creation of the monster, but it is his abysmal practice of the science of education that leads to the destruction of innocents, which is one of the chief mechanisms through which Shelley evokes horror. Shelley consistently uses the melodramatic techniques she inherited from the Gothic novel, but she uses them to direct the reader back to the omnipresent question of how to govern the capabilities of the future. Gothic fiction may have featured plenty of fear, fantastic events, and horror, but Shelley was really the first author to employ this kind of crisis narrative to focus the reader’s attention so directly on key changes that were already underway in the England of her time. This use of Gothic tropes and a Gothic setting gives rise to a brilliant set of rhetorical moves, and there are plenty of textual clues that indicate that she knew very clearly what she was doing.

Although much of the commentary about Frankenstein has focused on the ethics of science surrounding Victor’s creation of the monster, I would argue that it is a novel primarily about development and education, and only secondarily about science as the subject of that education. There are essentially two models of education presented in the novel. The first and most widely discussed is that of Victor himself, and involves his growing rejection of earlier alchemical treatises in favor of experimental science following his visit to two “modern” professors at the University of Ingolstadt. But equally if not more important is the education of the creature, who at a key point in Chapter 15 cries, “Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come?”—universal questions of identity, science, and education.
Peter Brooks, arguing that language is one of the novel’s principal themes writes that the creature begins his education in the De Laceys’ hovel; he notes that the creature and the De Laceys are able to communicate their experiences and feelings to each other. Although we must never forget that this is recounted through the creature’s voice and not Shelley’s, I believe that there is something to Brooks’s remark concerning the creature’s state of mind as he discovers the possibilities of spoken language: “What particularly impress him are the emotional effects wrought by these sounds, which ‘sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the beholders. This was indeed a godlike science’” (28).

The very fact that the creature must learn such basics about language by observing the DeLacey family attests to Victor’s only failure as an educator and as the creature’s only “parent.” Victor's bad parenting is actually the result of his own bad scientific practice; it is not the fault of science itself, and certainly not of the creature, but is the culmination of a lifelong pattern of refusal to learn fundamentals or to follow through on projects, which grows worse and worse until he finally begins something that he cannot escape simply by abandoning it. He is a poor scientist possibly because he has been a bad student, and a bad teacher probably for the same reason. He refuses community, he refuses guidance, and he essentially refuses the model of education that Shelley presents through the creature’s encounter with the De Laceys. Further, while I have embraced a reading of Victor as a scientist, student, and teacher, the brilliant case that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar make for the parenting metaphor serves as well for Victor’s role as an educator in loco parentis.
Shelley was writing at least in part about an emerging crisis in education which she likely became aware of during her own education; rapid new developments in science could not simply be plugged into the classical curriculum with any expectation of success, but a purely scientific curriculum risked devaluing the moral center provided by the older classical model. Sherryl Vint’s comment on science fiction, specifically the field of “science studies,” precisely illuminates some of what I believe to be Shelley’s aims:

If at its worst sf can be the literature of all the worst aspects of science—technocratism, singularity of vision, domination of nature, inserting a new gadget into the same world—then at its best it might be considered the literature of science studies—concerned with the social consequences of developments in science and technology, insisting on dialectic exchange between the novum and the larger social world, sensitive to the contingency of knowledge, and open to new ways of seeing and being (421).

Through Victor’s failings as both student and teacher, Shelley invokes exactly “the worst aspects of science” that Vint describes.

In this chapter, I will adapt Daly’s “productive fear” thesis (from “Incorporated Bodies: Dracula and the Rise of Professionalism”11) to discuss how in Frankenstein,

11 Eric Kwan-Wai Yu cites Daly, setting out to “substantially revise and further develop” the idea of productive fear in his 2006 article “Productive fear: Labor, Sexuality, and
Shelley pioneered a particular method of manipulating the tools of the fantastic in the service of an essentially educational agenda, as reflected primarily in Shelley’s account of the creature’s own education.

**Shelley and Education**

Shelley claims in the 1818 preface to *Frankenstein*, “I have […] endeavoured to preserve the truth of the elementary principles of human nature” (11), but she was aware that this might seem problematical in such an overtly fantastic narrative. Sir Walter Scott called *Frankenstein* the most “philosophical and refined” kind of fantastic fiction—that which isn’t fantastic for its own sake, but uses the fantastic to explore the workings of the human mind. But what in Shelley’s own life and education led to the design of such a radical experiment in philosophical fiction?

Critics must always invoke biographical material with caution, but because *Frankenstein* itself deals largely with early development and rational education, Shelley’s own development and education is relevant, as are her views about the educational process. The first and most useful basis for understanding Shelley’s intentions in *Frankenstein* is the author’s private correspondence and journals. Mary Shelley received no formal education; instead, her father William Godwin schooled her at home, primarily

Mimicry in Bram Stoker’s Dracula” to arrive at a different end (146). I cite both Daly and Kwan-Wai Yu in chapter four, but it’s important to mention here, because I am adapting Daly’s idea to yet a third purpose.
teaching her how to study and pursue ideas on her own. Where those lessons ended,\textsuperscript{12} she educated herself by means of her father’s friends\textsuperscript{13} and his library (Mellor 9-10). Her letters confirm that she shared some of the radical spirit of her deceased mother, whom she (by her own testimony) adored in absentia, through a devoted study of Mary Wollstonecraft’s books and papers (5). Her letters also reveal a fascination with Prometheus, the story of stealing fire from the gods—the classical archetype of hubris—and of power that can either help or harm.

She remained politically and philosophically radical (though less confrontational than her parents), living much of her life in voluntary exile and avoiding the public eye after Percy Shelley’s death in 1822. She had an obvious interest in science and literature, and a definite attraction to social and philosophical thought, but at the same time a desire to avoid the publicity that would arise from public engagement with these issues. The result was a novel that (especially with the introduction to the 1831 edition) directly addressed the place of science and spirituality in nineteenth-century life, but clothed its

\textsuperscript{12} Godwin’s home lessons did not differentiate between boys and girls, and all of the children received music lessons at home; later Mary had to educate herself while the boys were sent away to school (Mellor 9-11).

\textsuperscript{13} According to Brian Aldiss, in his speech upon the publication of the Bodleian edition of \textit{Frankenstein}, Shelley was “A teenager! She was a teenager, you know?! Not the sort of female teenager today’s newspapers would have us believe in. Mary came from a civilized—a crowded but civilized—home. Literature, science and politics were regularly discussed there; Coleridge read his poetry there. (To see and to hear Samuel Taylor belting out ‘The Ancient Mariner’ might not have been to everyone’s taste—a bit like early Dr. Who—but it is something to have a living poet rampant in the parlour…” (Aldiss). As we will see, Coleridge was also a strong influence on Christina Rossetti.
philosophical intentions in a fantastic tale in order to appeal to a popular audience. The novel was originally published anonymously in 1818 to avoid the scathing social criticism that would likely have been leveled at the girl who had run off with a married poet, and possibly to avoid the skepticism that might have greeted the philosophical pretensions of a teenage, female author.

In any discussion of the major didactic points of this text and Shelley’s likely aims, it is crucial to take into account the differences between the anonymously published 1818 edition—strongly influenced by the hand of her husband Percy—and the 1831 edition published under Shelley’s own name, and including the preface which recounts the now-famous tale of the novel’s origin. For example, in response to the changes in Victor’s nature as depicted in the 1818 and 1831 editions, Mellor contends that Shelley’s 1818 text “present[s] a more coherent literary vision generated from the most immediate psychological and social experiences of the author” (39). This is a defensible position, but Mellor goes on to write that part of the superiority of vision in the 1818 text is due to Shelley’s extensive revisions after the tragic deaths of her husband and children, which led her to emphasize destiny over will in the 1831 edition. (Both are crucial concepts in discussing the novel’s treatment of education.) While I can agree with Mellor that it might have been better—at least from a modern point of view—that Shelley not called

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14 Hindle’s 1831 text is a composite text: he retains the Milton epigraph, and marks out the three-part division.
the powerful forces in the novel Destiny, but I am not sure that the novel is entirely the worse for this emphasis on destiny. It might be that Shelley’s understanding of loss deepened her capacity to empathize with a creature who had never been allowed to be happy, and that of a man who was stripped of everything.

Destiny certainly plays a significant role in derailing the hopes of the novel’s multiple narrators. At the beginning of her essay “Monsters in the Garden,” quotes the 1818 preface to Frankenstein, which declares that it aims to exhibit “the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue” (qtd. in Ellis 123). Ellis points out that for the novel’s three narrators, this aim is a spectacularly tragic failure: “It is true that each of the novel’s three interconnected narratives is told by a man to whom domestic affection is not merely amiable but positively sacred. Yet each narrator also has been denied the experience he reveres so highly, and cannot, because of this denial, transmit it to a future generation” (123). Ellis does not mean simply that Walton and Victor are denied the opportunity to be fathers, and that Victor denies the creature a mate, and thus the possibility of fatherhood: she also cites Victor’s own father’s failure to guide Victor’s interest in science—in short, his failure to educate his son. As Ellis points out, in the 1818 edition Victor’s father shares his interest in science, and in the 1831 edition, he does not. (One of the reasons this is so is because Shelley removed some of the scientific references in the 1831 revision, and a possible unintended consequence is that the shared interest went with them.) Thus, while it may be true that the 1818 edition makes for a more coherent narrative, it is also important to recognize that the 1831 edition, revised after Percy’s death and thus without further editorial emendation on his part, offers
additional insights into Shelley’s developing attitudes, in particular in regard to the
degree of Victor’s self-determination and the role of Clerval.

In her reading of Gothic fiction, Shelley found tropes that would “Speak to the
mysterious forces of our nature and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader
dread to look round, to curdle the blood, to quicken the beatings of the heart” (8)—and
then bound them tightly to the deep theological and philosophical anxieties that haunted
post-Enlightenment Europe. So far, there has been relatively little examination of how
Shelley orchestrates her readers’ fears to in order to force an examination of the issues of
education and science that underlie the novel. These issues, far more than the mere
creation of an artificial monster, are what crucially link the novel to the traditions of
exploration and extrapolation that would characterize later science fiction, which often
sought both to educate its readers by bringing scientific ideas and processes into the
realm of popular culture, and to question the value of scientific education divorced from
moral education

Perhaps the most prominent example of how Shelley combined Gothic fear with
social concerns is the way she evokes the exciting, intimidating flare of scientific
discovery, but then shows us how this seems to come at the cost of the disturbing
murders of innocents. By the time Shelley wrote Frankenstein early in the nineteenth
century, the process of a socially constructed innocence attached to children and young
people—brides, youths, maidens—had already begun to take shape, although it certainly
had roots leading back as far as Biblical literature. The Romantics and Victorians placed
extraordinary importance on innocence, and Frankenstein, “Goblin Market,” and Dracula
all feature the murders or violation and near-death of innocents. But only *Frankenstein* links this familiar trope to the idea of scientific progress and scientific learning rather than to supernatural forces or ancient evils. Victor’s capricious and irresponsible use of science—and his failure to assume moral responsibility for the development and education of his creation—leads indirectly to the deaths of William Frankenstein, Justine Moritz, Henry Clerval, and Victor’s bride Elizabeth. If the reader moreover feels any sympathy for the creature, created as innocent as any naturally born human, the emotional complexity is only increased. This emotional complexity is a key reason that *Frankenstein* represents a radical shift from earlier Gothic novels: the terror emerges not as the result of summoning demons or invoking ancient rituals; it emerges from rational human activity of the sort that was already well underway by the time Shelley wrote the novel. It isn’t only the invention of a monster that causes people to feel dread; it’s the nature of that invention—how easy the fearful thing is to imagine as potentially real (Gardner 52). As Rosemary Jackson notes, “Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein is the first of many fantasies re-deploying a Faustian tale on a fully human level. From then onwards, fantastic narratives are clearly secularized: the ‘other’ is no longer designated as supernatural, but is an externalization of part of the self” (55). Once Frankenstein’s creature begins to tell his own story, his rationality brings the terror within the realm of

15 Rousseau’s writing had secularized the concept of a state of un­fallen innocence. The creature’s origin is completely atheist.
reason, something much less random than the purely supernatural plumed helm from the first pages of *The Castle of Otranto*.

At first *Frankenstein* may seem very much like its Gothic predecessors, but there are important differences. Mary Wollstonecraft associates the Promethean with the revolutionary (both lionized Romantic qualities), as well as with genius and galvanism. According to Joan Slonczewski and Michael Levy, galvanism, the electrical stimulation of dead muscle tissue, was known science in the era from which Mary Shelley extrapolated *Frankenstein* (174). On the other hand, James Rieger’s 1974 introduction to *Frankenstein* dismisses the science in the novel as “switched-on magic, souped-up alchemy.” He is perhaps right to dismiss, or at least de-emphasize the role of galvanism as a real-world basis for the novel’s science fiction, but as I have said, he is misreading the science, and particularly the role of extrapolative science in science fiction narratives.

The notion that electricity might at some point be used to reanimate dead tissue was Shelley’s strategy of shifting her monstrous creation from the impossible to the possible (at least by 1818 standards), but the key to genuine extrapolation in science fiction lies not in simply imagining a new technology, but in exploring the possible consequences of that technology. One such consequence, which I argue is central to the novel, is that, once such a creature is made, the question of moral responsibility is unavoidable, including the question of how such a creature should be taught. That is far more central to locating the “science” in the novel than the simple question of galvanism.

As Macdonald and Scherf point out, Shelley removed some of the scientific references from the 1831 edition: passing references to experiments with steam,
distillation, and air pumps, for example. Victor shrouds his methods in secrecy for reasons of the story. However, Reiger is missing something subtle, something for which Mellor gives Shelley her due: her grasp of the implications of the science of her time. Even in its scene-setting, *Frankenstein* distinguishes between attempting to understand the physical universe and attempting to control it. Both Victor and his creature do well when they practice the former, which Shelley associates with the philosophy of Erasmus Darwin, but come to grief or cause great grief for others when they attempt to practice the latter, which Shelley associates with Galvani and Davy (Mellor 90). Davy thought a scientist should “interrogate nature with power, not simply as a scholar, passive and seeking only to understand her operations, but rather as a master” a hubristic attitude which Shelley considered “profoundly dangerous” (Mellor 93).

Wollstonecraft’s reference to “the lightning glance of genius,” (Wollstonecraft 73), according to Shelley’s 1831 introduction, was the inspiration for the novel and echoes in Victor’s description of his discoveries. Mark Knopf writes in *Strange Horizons*, “*Frankenstein*, with its creation of new life from death, heralded nineteenth-century fears that there were some things we were just not meant to know, some mysteries that should not be probed.” My reading accepts Gilbert and Gubar’s view of *Frankenstein* as a re-imagining of *Paradise Lost*, taking it as given that Victor’s hubris is

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16 “But, in the present state of things, every difficulty in morals that escapes from human discussion, and equally baffles the investigation of profound thinking, and the lightning glance of genius, is an argument on which I build my belief of the immortality of the soul. Reason is, consequentially, the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth” (Wollstonecraft 73-74).
one of the most crucial parts of the story. It also accepts Knopf’s observation that the real-world correlate of the conflict between Victor and his creation was the anxiety surrounding the intersection of science, secularism, education, and theology, though Knopf does not directly relate these issues to what we might call the “science fictionality” of the narrative.

In her 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*, Shelley writes that she began with a dream: she discovered in her dream what Ursula Le Guin calls reasons that Reason did not know,17 and from this came a text intended to evoke the same feelings in her readers. Almost everyone who has read the novel is familiar with *Frankenstein’s* origin story: “‘We will each,’” cried Byron, “write a ghost story!” So Mary went away and thought about it, fruitlessly, until a few nights later she had a nightmare in which a “pale student” used strange arts and machineries to arouse from unlife the “hideous phantasm of a man” (Le Guin 41). In her 1831 introduction to the novel, Shelley wrote that the image “…haunted me...if I could only contrive to frighten my reader as I myself had been frightened that night!” (9). She recognized some of the frightful depth and powerful potential of her story: “What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow” (9).

17 “If you are fantasizing...you might be using imagination...as a means of discovering reasons Reason does not know, discovering yourself to yourself” (Le Guin 40). Originally a Blaise Pascal quote: “Reason is the slow and tortuous method by which these who do not know the truth discover it. The heart has its own reason which reason does not know.” *Pensées*, 1670.
If a dream and a familiarity with Gothic tales may have given the tale shape, it is likely that the ideas of Shelley’s own father, William Godwin, helped give it substance. MacDonald and Scherf suggest that Shelley felt that the “relentless rationalism that initially made her father’s book\textsuperscript{18} so exciting ultimately made it forbidding” (13). *Frankenstein* is dedicated to him, and MacDonald and Scherf go so far as to say “even without this clue, reviewers would probably have identified the anonymous author as one of his disciples” (12). But though she approved of his ideas, she may not have thought that his methods were perfect. In fact, she had always been reserved, and as a mature woman she found political extremism alienating. An often-quoted entry from her journals, dated October 21, 1838, clearly shows her feelings toward direct confrontation:

\begin{quote}
\ldots some have a passion for reforming the world; others do not cling to particular opinions. That my parents and Shelley were of the former class, makes me respect it. I respect such when joined to real disinterestedness, toleration, and a clear understanding…\ldots I earnestly desire the good and enlightenment of my fellow creatures…\ldots but I am not for violent extremes, which duly bring on an injurious reaction. (553)
\end{quote}

Shelley’s own words bespeak a firm devotion to responsibility; she is the kind of thinker who respects scientists who eagerly delve into nature the way political radicals delve into philosophy—but only when they combine their observations with qualities of social

\textsuperscript{18} *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice.*
awareness and moderation. She cannot condone violent extremism—or Victor’s violent passions—but believes in care and mindfulness. She does not endeavor to teach (as she declares in her letters she cannot do) but to paint a picture which will not “bring on an injurious reaction” because *Frankenstein* is only a novel, a *conte philosophique*.

Nevertheless, teaching and the failure of teaching proves to be one of the most enduring themes of the novel.

As mentioned earlier, Shelley found her father’s style forbidding, perhaps even inaccessible to lay readers. In a letter to Edward John Trelawney dated January 26, 1837, she wrote, “I cannot teach, I can only paint,” which is a much less aggressive, and perhaps less forbidding, way of critiquing cultural values (*Selected Letters* 268). She may have thought herself unable to teach in her father’s sense, but it is doubtful that she could have been unaware of the role of storytelling in teaching. However, she was also well aware of possible resistance to some of what she had to say, and entered the discourse of the day through a side door: in the 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein* she wrote, “I am by no means indifferent to the manner in which whatever moral tendencies exist in the sentiments or characters it contains shall affect the reader; yet my chief concern in this respect has been limited to avoiding the enervating effects of novels of the present day” (12). Shelley’s awareness that fiction carries moral weight that may affect readers, and

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19 It must be noted that Percy Shelley wrote the 1818 preface to *Frankenstein*, which was reprinted in the 1831 edition. However, judging from her private papers, his preface does not seem to be a misrepresentation of Mary Shelley’s views, except possibly the following passage: “It was commenced, partly as a source of amusement, and partly as an
her concern with energizing readers, is explicit. So the almost legalistic caveat inserted into the preface by Percy Shelley—possibly as a disclaimer intended to protect Mary’s reputation—that “The opinions which naturally spring from the character and situation of the hero are by no means to be conceived as existing always in my own conviction; nor is any influence justly to be drawn from the following pages as prejudicing an philosophical doctrine of whatever kind” (12)—ends up sounding disingenuous. In fact, Shelley’s refusal to tell readers which doctrine to espouse is her most effective means of calling all dogma into question, and thus of promoting her essentially didactic agenda to promote critical thought, and to question the nature and purposes of science and education in a scientific age. In fact, her disclaimer is in a small but significant way another example of the novel’s influence on the rhetoric of later science fiction, echoed more than a century later by Arthur C. Clarke’s distancing himself from his own speculations with an epigraph to his 1953 novel Childhood’s End: “The opinions expressed in this book are not those of the author” (4).

Shelley’s commentary on science is partly a response to culture, partly to her father specifically—but with the caveat that her father was a leading intellectual of the day who represented only one school of thought. Godwin was a leading religious Dissenter (Royle 119-120). To say that Shelley wrote partially in response to her father’s views and specifically in response to one of his books is not to reduce Frankenstein to a expedient for exercising any untried resources of mind. Other motives were mingled with these, as the work proceeded” (11). Percy Shelley believed that Mary Shelley had a literary birthright, and did urge her to claim it by writing.
simple act of worshipful tribute to her father’s views: the novel is a complex text in its own right, and its very form served as a critique of earlier ideologies, including her father’s.\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Frankenstein}, like much of the best science fiction that followed it, democratized scientific and philosophical concepts by presenting them in a way that was not only accessible, but was also thrilling, to popular readers.

Shelley, like her mother, was more aware than her father of the interdependence of rationality and emotion. Mary Wollstonecraft wove allusion, imagery, and metaphor into her rhetoric, drawing heavily on Milton. Shelley’s familiarity with her mother’s work is firmly established; it can be said without embellishment that she learned metaphor and deeply felt argument at her mother’s grave, but a galvanic spark entirely her own took her further down a more creative rhetorical path than either of her parents ventured. As Mellor explains it, Shelley’s “radical epistemological skepticism forces her to insist upon the fictiveness and temporality of all imaginative constructs…[and] forces her to fuse the literal and the figurative in one continuous language system” (164). This fusion of the literal and the figurative has often been cited as a principle characteristic of science fiction narratives. As Ursula K. Le Guin writes in her introduction to \textit{The Norton Book of Science Fiction}, “Literalization of metaphor is a characteristic of science fiction” (30). Thus, in order to understand the radicalism of \textit{Frankenstein}’s narrative form, one must first account for what makes it science fictional in the first place.

\textsuperscript{20} In fact, in reference to Shelley’s novel \textit{The Last Man}, Mellor writes that Shelley “criticizes the utopian idealism of her father and husband” as well as more conservative political ideologies (162).
Locating the Science in the First Science Fiction Novel

Shelley and *Frankenstein* are mentioned in nearly every chapter of The *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, and nearly every contributor to that volume has a particular approach to what makes it science fictional. Perhaps the most important discussion is by Slonczewski and Levy, in the chapter “Science Fiction and the Life Sciences.” Slonczewski and Levy call *Frankenstein* a founding work, “arguably the basis for sf since” (174). They write that “In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, writers faced questions of biological change, intended or unintended, in human nature or in our natural surroundings,” referring to the upheavals of thought caused by the pace of scientific and technological advances. The critical observations are that the nineteenth century was a time of scientific change, particularly biological, and that the idea behind *Frankenstein* was “extrapolated from known science of that era, the electrical stimulation

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21 This line of argument seems to have begun with Muriel Spark, a London poet who in 1951 began a passionate effort to revive Shelley’s literary reputation:

The author of *Frankenstein*, she suggested, was the true founder of science fiction and had paved the way for contemporary masters of the genre including Aldous Huxley, George Orwell and, above all, H. G. Wells. Moreover, continued Spark, it was quite unfair to say, as so many did, that Mary Shelley had spent her long widowhood as a literary hack writing for money rather than as a creative artist. *The Last Man, Perkin Warbeck, Falkner* and *Lodore* may not be entirely successful as novels, but they are clearly the work of a committed novelist testing out the limits of the genre. (Hughes)
of dead muscle” (174). In 1803, for example, Giovanni Aldini attempted to reanimate a corpse by applying electric current, and Shelley was clearly pioneering the habit, common in later science fiction, of basing her speculative ideas at least in part on such real-world experiments.

However, other critics name other reasons for calling *Frankenstein* the first fully realized science fiction novel: Mendlesohn argues that it is Victor Frankenstein’s failure to deal with his creation in a satisfactory manner, “rather than the electrified corpse, which truly place[s] *Frankenstein* as the progenitor of sf. In [chapters 11 and 12] Shelley argues for nurture not nature, and heralds the obsession of science fiction with … scientific and rationalised education” (“Frankie” 2). Mellor agrees with Brian Aldiss and other critics who claim that Shelley “initiated a new literary genre,” now called science fiction. More importantly, she writes, Shelley

…used this knowledge both to analyze and criticize the more dangerous implications of the scientific method and its practical results. Implicitly, she contrasted what she considered to be ‘good’ science—the detailed and reverent descriptions of the workings of nature—to what she considered to be ‘bad’ science, the hubristic manipulation of the elemental forces of nature to serve man’s private ends. (89)

But for our purposes, the creature’s origin is far less important than his education. Replace “science” with “education” in Mendlesohn’s paragraph and we approach what gives the novel its identity as science fiction—not simply what makes it *look* like science fiction. Taking control of the shaping and molding of minds was on par with taking
power out of the hands of the priesthood; that was the fire stolen from the gods. Shelley’s novel *The Last Man* provides a more complete picture of her view of the value of materialist over religious education, but the foundation of her philosophy is evident even in *Frankenstein*, where Mary Shelley subtly argues for the secular and against the theological. What we teach ourselves to be is what we become: “Mary Shelley posits no overarching mind of God, no eternal Power, no transcendental subject, to guarantee the truth or endurance of mental things” (Mellor 159). Maurice Hindle writes about two versions of the Prometheus myth (xxviii): Prometheus *pyrphoros*, in which Prometheus steals the spark and gives simple fire to people, and Prometheus *plasticator*, by Ovid, in which Prometheus takes the living cosmic spark and molds man from it. Shelley essentially combines the two, achieving a unique pitch capable of playing on fears of transgressing the natural order in whichever way the reader liked least, blending and conflating the divine prerogative of forming the mind and the brain. Aldiss’s case for why *Frankenstein* is science fiction can be read in much the same way as Mellor’s:

…it was Mary Shelley, poised between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, who first wrote of life—that vital spark—being created not by divine intervention as hitherto, but by scientific means; by hard work and by research.

That was new, and in a sense it remains new. The difference is impressive, persuasive, permanent. (Aldiss)

Victor’s failure comes partly from his inability to follow through his commitment to “hard work and research” once his creation comes alive. He fails to provide stability;
he rejects his baby; and he abdicates responsibility for the revolution he brought about:

“Victor Frankenstein’s failure to mother his child produces a monster at many levels of cultural meaning” (Mellor 215). Victor loses his nerve and reverts to alchemical patterns of thinking, referring to his creation as a demon, rather than adhering to rationality and scientific methodology. When Victor abandons science and reverts back to a spiritual way of thinking, his efforts fail and he and others suffer as a result (MacDonald and Scherf 18).

This crucial flaw in Victor’s way of thinking is, as Mellor points out, partly a reflection of Percy Shelley’s character:

Victor Frankenstein embodies certain elements of Percy Shelley’s temperament and character that had begun to trouble Mary Shelley. She perceived in Percy an intellectual hubris or belief in the supreme importance of mental abstractions that led him to be insensitive to the feelings of those who did not share his ideas and enthusiasms. The Percy Shelley that Mary loved lived in a world of abstract ideas; his actions were primarily motivated by theoretical principles…. While Mary endorsed and shared these goals, she had come to suspect in Percy’s case they sometimes masked an emotional narcissism, an unwillingness to confront…the impact of his demands on those most dependent upon him. (73)

Such “intellectual hubris” is repeatedly evident in Victor’s character, and in his ambition. His method is almost a parody of what Erasmus Darwin described, in The
Temple of Nature, as male reproduction: organisms that reproduced by solitary reproduction, as Victor does, were just like the parent organism (and male). Though not in any sense a biological offspring, the creature’s nature is initially just like Victor’s: tenacious, intelligent, thirsting for knowledge, lending the narrative its classic father-son conflict.

But how Victor gets his baby is almost irrelevant. Shelley is very little concerned with this birth process, except by way of setting the stage for, and eventually testing, a kind of thought-experiment derived from the available science of the day. Contemporary science fiction writer Robert Sawyer notes\(^{22}\) that Victor carefully studies the chemical reactions of decay, concluding that if they are chemical reactions, he can reverse them. That’s what we now know as biochemistry—as are the novel’s references to Galvani’s experiments with electrical stimulation of muscle tissue. The creature represents both a revolutionary scientific breakthrough and a child-learner for whom Victor becomes responsible. To Victor the creature is a moral and ethical responsibility, but to readers he is also the insertion of something new into the world, what science fiction critic Darko Suvin terms a “novum.”

As Edward James points out, the role of the scientist in science fiction has always been ambiguous rather than unreservedly heroic. This is the second fork in the family tree of Frankenstein criticism; having decided that it is a science fiction novel, critics often

\(^{22}\) In a lecture on February 2, 2008, on TVOntario's Big Ideas, originally recorded on October 2007 at the University of Waterloo.
discuss Victor’s and the creature’s actions in terms of the morality of science: as good or evil, moral or immoral, frequently lingering on the tension between intentions and outcomes, on the dual nature of scientific discovery. The creature’s first encounter with fire becomes representative of this dichotomy. First it warms him, then it burns him (78). The scene where he describes his awakening to his creator is emblematic and moving:

One day when I was oppressed by cold, I found a fire which had been left by some wandering beggars, and was overcome with delight at the warmth I experienced from it. 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. (107)

Macdonald and Scherf lay out a series of such competing binaries, suggesting that even if Shelley approves generally of modern science, she doesn’t approve of Victor’s specific practice of it (18-19). But that’s an oversimplification. Her disapproval also derives from the fact that Victor fails to balance his radical experiment with any sense of care or responsibility. He doesn’t take care of what he discovers. Like Percy Shelley, who in his Defense of Poetry “dismissed the original composed poem as a ‘fading coal’ of its original inspiration” (Mellor 80), Victor is most concerned with the process of creation, and is prepared to ignore or destroy the products of past efforts and try again for a perfect one the next time. As a biologist, chemist, and anatomist, Victor never blunders. As a psychologist, parent, and educator, he’s a wreck. His approach to education is essentially his approach to experimental science—if the student fails, destroy everything.
Frankenstein and the Failure of Education

A friend remarked to me that “Victor's baby doesn't get either a childhood or a name, which is why popular culture calls him Frankenstein.” The lack of an extended childhood is important. The creature may parody some of the developmental aspects of childhood—such as his discovery of the nature of fire—but he is essentially thrust into the world with an adult body and little guidance or nurturing. Of course Frankenstein can be read as a cautionary tale about science; that is one of the core foundational readings, and the whole preface is a subtle disclaimer about radical science. Science is a powerful tool, and like all powerful tools, must be handled with care; rapid progress must be accompanied by careful thought and methodical weighing of the implications of each new development. In short, sciences need their childhoods, too. We know that the unfortunate creature does not get the childhood he requires from his creator; later on, he describes the experience that needs must serve as one of his “childhood memories.” After lying low in the shed attached to the De Lacey cottage, the creature has his first encounter with positive human emotion:

The silver hair and benevolent countenance of the aged cottager won my reverence, while the gentle manners of the girl enticed my love. He played a sweet mournful air, which I perceived, drew tears from the eyes of his amiable companion, of which the old man took no notice, until she sobbed audibly; he then pronounced a few sounds, and the fair creature, leaving her work, knelt at his feet. He raised her, and smiled with such kindness
and affection that I felt sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature; they were a mixture of pain and pleasure, such as I had never experienced, either from hunger or cold, warmth or food; and I withdrew from the window, unable to bear these emotions. (111)

The creature is overwhelmed by something hitherto beyond his ability to imagine, having been abandoned at the hour of his creation. The De Laceys are in effect his first model of human relations.

The normal model of human development demonstrated by the De Laceys is, more than anything, slow. Slow isn’t something Victor is especially well-equipped to handle. Even his own education takes far longer than he would prefer, and he impulsively rejects all his earlier studies of Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus as soon as he encounters modern science at the University of Ingolstadt. He is impatient with the slow, methodical process of science partly because he is wedded to the idea of genius. Admittedly, Victor is a genius. That is a Romantic idea, but it's also true that while science advances at a laborious crawl most of the time, it also leaps ahead now and then. In Victor, Shelley has given us a protagonist who possesses a powerful intellect at the right point in history to make one of those dangerous leaps. It leaves him (and by metaphoric and literal extension, society) with a full-blown scientific development but with no a guiding philosophy. The power of the creature throws into sharp relief the critical need for Victor to behave like a responsible parent or teacher, but Shelley actually uses Victor as a counterexample. Locke’s philosophy of education was to teach by example, but the example Victor offers his creature is impetuous, irresponsible, and cruel. But, as Mellor
points out, Shelley provides an alternative that works, for both the creature and the young woman, Safie:

Mary Shelley traces the creature’s linguistic development from his earliest acquisition of nouns and proper names through his grasp of abstractions to his ability to speak, read, and finally write, the latter processes enabled by his overhearing Safie’s French lessons in the next room and by his acquisition of a private library. While Locke’s insistence that children learn best from examples now seems commonplace, Peter Gay has rightly reminded us that human rationality and the capacity for self-discipline evolve gradually in the growing child and that the subject-matter to be learned must be adapted to the differential capabilities of children at different stages of development. (49)

There are several elements at work here: Shelley is showing that rationally applied education can work. It works for Safie, and it works for the creature. Notably, the creature learns both the language skills taught by the De Lacey family and the capricious cruelty taught by Victor Frankenstein. He tells Victor how he learned basic vocabulary including wood, fire, bread, and milk, and to respond in sympathy to the cottagers’ fortunes (115); this basic pattern of learning, of course, also serves as an implicit critique of Victor’s failure to provide such education himself.

Mellor later writes that Shelley “reveals her nagging doubt whether even a supportive family can produce a virtuous adult” (50), but the creature’s failure to become a “virtuous adult” can hardly be laid at the De Laceys’ door when they don’t even realize
they are his teachers and are therefore unprepared for him. They aren’t given a chance to
get over their initial shock upon seeing the creature, and the situation isn’t of their
making. Everyone in that situation is betrayed by circumstance. In one of the bitterest
scenes of the novel, the creature tells Victor how he sought asylum from the old blind
man, but the sudden revelation of his strangeness appeared threatening to Felix and the
other members of the De Lacey household:

“Now is the time! Save and protect me! You and your family are
the friends whom I seek. Do not desert me in my hour of trial!”

“Great God!” exclaimed the old man, “who are you?”

At that instant the cottage door opened, and Felix, Safie, and Agatha
entered. Who can describe their horror and consternation on beholding
me? Agatha fainted, and Safie, unable to attend to her friend, rushed out of
the cottage. Felix darted forward, and with supernatural force tore me
from his father, to whose knees I clung: in a transport of fury, he dashed
me to the ground and struck me violently with a stick. I could have torn
him limb from limb, as the lion rends the antelope. But my heart sunk
within me as with bitter sickness, and I refrained. I saw him on the point
of repeating his blow, when, overcome by pain and anguish, I quitted the
cottage, and in the general tumult escaped unperceived to my hovel….  

(137)

Here, as in The Last Man, Shelley doesn’t flinch from showing the potential failures of
any system or ideology. But more than that:
She also reveals the failures of the dominant political ideologies of her day—both radical (republican or democratic) and conservative (monarchial). Finally, she denies the authority of all ideologies, all systems of belief (Mellor 160).

Shelley’s Darwinian model—Erasmus rather than the later Charles—holds true for scientific education as well, for both Victor Frankenstein and the creature. When either of them is an observer, learning from nature or from other people apart from any ideological agenda, he gains both knowledge and emotional growth. When either attempts to control or subdue nature or impose his will on other people according to some predetermined belief system, everyone suffers and catastrophe follows. Attempts to learn what is readily offered are rewarded; attempts to take what another is not prepared to give freely meet with disaster. This is true of systematic education as well: the creature represents both a single student in a rational educational system, and an infant discipline that Victor has brought into being, which we might term science education, but which at the time was more commonly referred to as natural philosophy. Victor fails to give his science a philosophy, or rather, he gives it the wrong one. Victor was meant to educate his creature in moral philosophy, but instead abandons him.

But it is not merely the fact of the creature’s abandonment and later autodidactic learning that suggests the notion that nurture is more important than nature, or origin. Shelley’s choice of curriculum for her creature drives this point home. The creature finds *Paradise Lost* and reads it; Milton’s deeply religious epic poem exposes him to the possible religious origin of humanity. But he is exposed to a secular competing theory,
when he hears Felix De Lacey reading the anti-religious Volney\textsuperscript{23} to his sister (MacDonald and Scherf 24-25). Finally, he is exposed to Goethe’s classic \textit{bildungsroman} \textit{The Sorrows of Young Werther}, with its sensitive artistic youth choosing suicide over the prospect of bringing harm to another, and to Plutarch’s \textit{Lives}, with its explorations of the development of character and its role in the actions of famous men. One of the most critical and often overlooked aspects of the novel is the creature’s touching effort to construct for himself the moral and rational education that his creator has denied him, and to discover the wonder inherent in such learning. “‘While I improved in speech,’” the creature reports, “‘I also learned the science of letters as it was taught to the stranger, and this opened before me a wide field for wonder and delight’” (144). Later, upon discovering Goethe, Plutarch, and Milton, he reports that these works stirred in him “‘an infinity of new images and feelings’” (152).

Victor and the creature are not the only models of education depicted in \textit{Frankenstein}, however. Mellor notes Shelley’s characterization of Clerval, for example, who defies his father and wishes to make himself “complete master of the Oriental languages, as thus he should open a field for the plan of life he had marked out for himself” (70); one might argue that he is committing Victor’s error in kind if not degree. Clerval is often cited as Victor’s better nature; he is certainly an innocent. Victor claims that Clerval “called forth the better feelings of my heart; he taught me to love the aspect

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ruins of Empires}. 
of nature, and the cheerful faces of children. Excellent friend! how sincerely did you love me and endeavour to elevate my mind until it was on a level with your own!” (71). Clerval thus seems filled with promise, even after Victor is well along his destructive path.

It is worth considering whether Victor himself ever had a chance to be “good” according to the rules of Shelley’s game. Whether Victor himself could have been better educated or parented depends to some extent on which edition of the novel one reads, but Mellor admits that even in the 1818 first edition, Shelley had all along been “rewriting *Paradise Lost*” and that she “insistently link[ed] Eumes Victor Frankenstein with Satan” (77). The significance of this fact is that Milton’s Satan was never an independent agent but was instead subject to the will of God all along. If we accept that the *Paradise Lost* reading has some validity, which Mellor clearly does, then the links with destiny were there in the very conception of the novel. This does not mean, however, that the role of education is less significant than I am arguing; in fact a good part of what makes the novel science fictional is Victor’s ongoing struggle against the notion of destiny and toward the kind of self-determination promised by his growing understanding that new discoveries in science might be extrapolated into radical change. Very early in the novel, when the fifteen-year-old Victor observes a tree struck by lightning, he blames destiny, but as an adult scientist, he comes to view nature as malleable, subject to his own will.

Regardless of one’s critical position, the “Destiny argument” is one of the problems in the novel that can’t be ignored, especially in the context of the tension between nature and nurture. Everyone is subject to influences so strong they might as
well be destiny, or the next thing to it, unless they’re willing to do some hard work on self-awareness—which Victor is not. Ironic as it may be, self-awareness is one fundamental difference between Victor and the monster. Victor’s early life and his father’s failures as a parent and educator are passive failures. Victor’s own failures are more active: he deliberately constructs a creature of monstrous proportions and brings it to life. As Kate Ellis points out, “Had Victor not been so furtive about his desire to astound the world, he might have allowed himself time to make a creature his own size, one who mirrored the whole of him, not just the part of himself he cannot bring home” (137). It is this furtive auto-didacticism that leads Victor to bring tragedy into his life and the lives of the people he loves, and potentially to the rest of the world. Victor’s pursuit of science transforms this faulty transfer of knowledge from parent to child into something more systemic—the creature isn’t only a child, but a product of science as well.

Some critics have claimed on the basis of the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* that Shelley fully embraced the idea of destiny, and had abandoned the idea that people could shape their fates in any meaningful way. Mellor’s chapter “Revising *Frankenstein*” anatomizes the differences between the 1818 and 1831 editions, and it is very convincing in arguing that by 1831 Shelley had given up on the idea that education could make much of a difference and was convinced that human beings are at the mercy of forces beyond their control. Initially, While Mellor’s evidence may seem compelling in describing Shelley's “guilt-ridden and unshakable despair” and arguing that the deaths of her
husband, children, and Byron had “convinced Shelley that human events are decided not by personal choice or free will but by material forces beyond our control” (170).

But when Mellor quotes one of Shelley’s letters, the letter itself seems far more ambiguous than she makes out: “The power of Destiny I feel every day pressing more & more on me, & I yield myself a slave to it, in all except my moods of mind, which I endeavour to make independant [sic] of her, & thus to wreathe a chaplet, where all is not cypress, in spite of the Eumenides” (qtd. in Mellor170). Shelley is plainly telling her friend that in spite of everything that has happened, though she may not be in control of outward circumstance, she can (at least) have control over her own mind—in her mind, everything need not be mourning (cypress), despite fate (the Eumenides). Shelley may be down, but she is not out, and her later letters are not those of a completely beaten woman.

Gilbert and Gubar call Shelley, and other female writers of the Romantic period, “Milton’s daughters.” They compare Shelley to Christina Rossetti, who, they claim, confronted her poetic father-figure by taking elements of his magnum opus and rewriting them as “a more accurate mirror of female experience” (220). However, Shelley directly challenges Milton. When, in the epigraph to the novel, she quotes Adam out of context, she is subverting Milton by taking one of the most rebellious passages from *Paradise Lost* VIII (381-391) (“Did I request thee, maker, from my clay”), cutting it off before the apologetic coda. Milton’s Adam is sorry, but Shelley’s monster, like

\[\text{24 Emphasis theirs.}\]
Prometheus, is not. But probably the single most commented-upon component of Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost* is Satan’s hubris—a quality shared by Victor Frankenstein. Yet it’s often been said—starting with Blake—that Satan gets all the best lines in the poem, and in *Frankenstein*, the creature is given some of the pithiest speeches. The creature is not only a learner, but also a representative of a new world that Victor has given birth to, and for which he is responsible.

Once science pierced the veil over the world, there was no mending it. In an education-centered reading, it is as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., wrote, a mind stretched by a new idea does not shrink back to its former dimensions (325).25 As much as Victor might wish it, the knowledge that he brought into the world cannot be forced back out, a theme that can be traced back to Pandora’s box and the Bible. Innocence can never be regained; the Romantic and Victorian premium on innocence made this a particularly horrifying prospect.

Victor is the first character in the novel to suffer a blow to his innocence. His emotions are overwhelming. He describes the experience, particularly his creature, in Edenic terms:

> How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form?

> His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful.

25 *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*: "Every now and then a man's mind is stretched by a new idea or sensation, and never shrinks back to its former dimensions."
Beautiful! Great God! …his hair was of lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness… (58)

After he finishes, Victor recoils in disgust, unable to look upon the creature, whose flowing hair and white teeth contrast so painfully with its shriveled yellow skin and watery eyes. He flees his apartments, willfully turning away from the knowledge of what he has done, knowingly referring to Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, who “turns no more his head/Because he knows a frightful fiend/doth close behind him tread” (60). When Victor at last returns to his rooms, his relief at the creature’s absence is physical: “it was not joy only that possessed me; I felt my flesh tingle with excess of sensitiveness, and my pulse beat rapidly” (62).

Though not part of the novel proper, Shelley’s introduction is often considered in conjunction with the novel, and the fact that she uses the words *hideous*, *powerful*, *frightful* (twice), *terrify*, *horror-stricken*, *hideous*, and *horrid* in conjunction with the concept of “the cradle of life” is important considering how many readings look at *Frankenstein* in terms of the feminine and birth, especially having to do with the circumstances of Mary Shelley’s life. Victor’s original plan to make a perfect child and teach it everything it would need to be a perfect adult takes an unexpected tragic turn when he decamps hours after its birth, abandoning his roles as father, teacher, and creator.

That Lockean idea of teaching by example, something Victor inadvertently does by abandoning his creature, is tied tightly to the concept of a rational education, and in turn to what Mellor calls Mary Shelley’s belief in the “egalitarian bourgeois family”
Likewise, this model of a nurturing family is connected to Shelley’s philosophical rationale for what makes good science and bad science:

In her view, “good” science recognizes and respects a sacred procreative life-force troped as “Mother Nature,” whereas “bad” science construes nature as dead matter or a machine to be manipulated, controlled, and changed. At the philosophical level, Shelley’s belief in the family implies that only a maternally loving, nurturant perception or linguistic construction of reality can prevent the semiotic construction of monsters.

(Mellor 215)

Victor’s success, combined with his failure, leaves him with a massive, disoriented creature without a system of ethics. His responsibility is to educate the creature. In metaphoric terms, as the scientist who has at a stroke brought a new science into being, he has a responsibility to stay and develop a rigorous methodology, system of ethics, and moral philosophy, but instead he runs away. He hides behind the claim that the knowledge is too awful, but the truth is that what he discovered can be discovered by others and he is not unique; that is the nature of science. Victor is “detached from a respect for nature and from a strong sense of moral responsibility for the products of [his] research” (Mellor 94). As Mellor observes, citing Humphrey Davy’s praise of the invention of gunpowder as an example, without that sense of responsibility, “purely objective thought and scientific experimentation can and do produce monsters” (94). Or, in the title of Goya’s famous 1799 print, “the sleep of reason produces monsters.”
Having botched his handling of the creature’s early education, Victor finds that he must deal with the resulting resentment and hatred. Recall Shelley’s description of the origin of the novel: “His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horrorstricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation would subside into dead matter…” (9). But Victor is a scientist, not an artist, and what he brings into the world will not so easily “subside.”

The story of a child rebelling against his or her parents is one of the oldest that we have. Sometimes there is a difference, a parting of ways, and admiration turns not just to indifference, but to loathing. In this case, the creator’s relationship with his creature is difficult, to say the least, and one that Victor wishes he had never begun. Shelley describes the terrible hope that “he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench forever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life” (9). This vain hope is crucial to Victor’s identity in the novel. What had initially seemed an avenue of evolution becomes a literal dead end, and Victor has failed not only as a scientist, but as a father and educator. The creature represents the new, technologically enabled, but directionless citizen who needs more than ever to be availed of a rational, careful, and full education. And to some extent, Victor does as well; the failures of his own education are reflected in the distorting mirror of the creature’s failed education.

In some ways this novel, at the very beginning of science fiction—which has often been touted for its own educational value—anticipates a familiar quotation from
one of science fiction’s masters later in the century: H.G. Wells’s warning that “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe” (1100). While Victor’s initial rejection of earlier alchemical thinking may be appealing to the modern reader, it is important to remember the other aspects of moral education that he apparently rejects along with it, and that finally result in his own catastrophic failure as a father and educator of the creature. What really makes Frankenstein a founding classic of science fiction is not its invention of a fabulous, iconic monster, but its speculative consideration of the nature of science and of learning, and of how we choose—or fail to choose—what that learning may lead to.
Chapter Three

Christina Rossetti: Faith, Feminism, and Fantasy

Like Mary Shelley, Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) was overshadowed during her lifetime by a more famous male family member, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and like Shelley achieved notable success after the death of that family member. In addition, Rossetti’s uncle John Polidori (who died before her birth) was present at that famous Villa Diodati evening that gave birth to *Frankenstein*, and had written his own influential tale *The Vampyre* (1819) in response to that evening. Some critics (David Morrill and Nancee Reeves) have even persuasively argued that Rossetti’s most famous work, “Goblin Market,” deliberately “reworked Polidori’s tale to celebrate female sexuality and imagination” (Reeves 64), while borrowing other vampiric and metrical elements from Coleridge’s “Christabel.” Yet by the comparatively sedate, proper mid-Victorian standards in which Rossetti was raised, Mary Shelley must have seemed something of a wild adventuress. By the same token, “Goblin Market”—a narrative poem rather than a sensational novel—never quite developed the pop culture legacy of the earlier *Frankenstein* or the later *Dracula*, though in its various editions it became a magnet for illustrators, beginning with Christina’s brother Dante Gabriel and including Arthur Rackham, Margaret Tarrant, and Laurence Housman. It has also led to at least three
different musical adaptations or operas. More important, by recasting earlier folk material into a complex narrative involving gender, power, and female identity, it helped lay the groundwork for later feminist fantasy writers from Angela Carter to Robin McKinley and Jane Yolen, and is arguably as much a foundational work for modern feminist fantasy as *Frankenstein* is for modern science fiction.

While Rossetti may not have been the same kind of radical as Mary Shelley, she was nevertheless a Victorian poet with agency—often circumventing the efforts of her brother Dante to control the publication of her poems—who used her poetry to address her condition as a nineteenth-century woman. While Gilbert and Gubar refer to Mary Shelley and other female writers of the Romantic and Victorian periods as “Milton’s daughters,” they argue that Christina Rossetti confronted Milton by taking elements of *Paradise Lost* and rewriting them as “*a more accurate mirror of female experience*” (220).

Rossetti would not have considered herself a feminist as many modern feminists understand the term,\(^\text{26}\) but arguably her work and life provided some of the material from which modern feminism is made. Her complex poems and prose pieces, many of which have long been recognized as subversive of the Victorian status quo, nearly all resist simple readings. In her nonfiction Rossetti states plainly that one of her aims is to foster

\(^{26}\text{There is still very little consensus regarding the meaning of feminism—first-, second-, or third-wave—which does not translate well across race or class. Rossetti certainly believed herself as capable as her brothers, but while she wanted to go to war to be a nurse, she did not believe it was appropriate for her or other women to go to war as soldiers.}\)
critical thought. When she was not writing poetry, she was writing essays endeavoring to explain the lessons within scripture. Rossetti believed that there were layers upon layers of allusion, imagery, and imaginative meaning in sacred texts—all holy, but all calling to the imagination (Kent and Stanwood12). Her own nonfiction, such as her devotional reading journal, *Time Flies*, is full of parables. According to Rossetti, almost everything is meant to be interpreted. As Kent and Stanwood write, “The clearest statement of this view occurs in *Seek and Find*: ‘Common things continually at hand, wind or windfall or budding bough, acquire a sacred association, and cross our path under aspects at once familiar and transfigured, and reach to our spirits while they serve our bodies’” (12). Her focus on scripture here might seem to invite strictly Christian readings of her poetry—but as we shall see, her use of fantastic imagery permitted her to overlay multiple meanings in the same text. She was a devout woman, but she was a complicated one. She was a Christian and a fantasist, but not necessarily a Christian fantasist.

In her most famous poem, “Goblin Market,” she uses the same tools of ambiguity, horror, and the fantastic as Shelley and Stoker, and in much the same way. Unlike in *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, no one dies onstage in “Goblin Market,” but Laura fails to the point of death before Lizzie risks her own life to rescue her sister, who has tasted the enervating fruits of the goblin men. In its own mid-Victorian way, it is as much a horror story as *Frankenstein* a few decades earlier or *Dracula* a few decades later, and it is just as skilled in the use of horror as a medium for moral didacticism, but her portrayal of the goblin men who are the agency of danger, and the sister who comes to the rescue, lend a distinctly feminist slant to her tale.
Rossetti’s multiple identities—a poet deeply engaged with the place of women in society, a devout Christian, and a fantasist whose most famous work is a classic horror tale—are clearly reflected in the welter of critical interpretations that have attached themselves to “Goblin Market” in particular. It has been read in many ways: as a fairytale, a lyrical religious allegory, or a lushly erotic, subversive exploration of feminine sexual identity—and one more: as a subtle satire on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and perhaps the whole Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Diane D’Amico writes that:

Numerous readings…have been offered, employing various critical approaches. For example, this poem of innocent maiden and sinister goblins has been read as a story of temptation and redemption, as an autobiographical narrative revealing repressed sexuality, a critique of Victorian materialism, a rejection of patriarchal amatory values, a celebration of woman’s power, a fantasy of incestuous lesbian love, and a literary representation of the eating disorder anorexia nervosa. (D’Amico 68-69)

Tempting though it may be to read “Goblin Market” according to a single “key,” we must remain aware that so doing is a reductive process that risks diminishing both the poem and the poet. Instead, I would argue that a proper engagement with this poem must also engage, at the very least, with each of the multiple identities of Rossetti mentioned above. For the purposes of our discussion here, in context with *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, the most significant of those identities is that of the devout poet who nevertheless uses fantasy (based on the fairy tale) as a means of subversively critiquing both the role of
women in Victorian society and, in particular, her own role in the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood and her relationship with her brother Dante Gabriel.

A Shifting Reputation

The critical tide of Christina Rossetti’s reputation has changed several times, but for generations her image has remained strangely flat and one-dimensional for the general reader. For a while critics, overlooking the girl who wanted to run off to the wars, saw little more than a religious woman who never married, writing poetry for and about God. Later, despite the fact that she was considered Tennyson’s potential successor for Poet Laureate, she was set aside as a repressed little poet writing neurotic little poems. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to D’Amico, Rossetti was valued most for her pretty language and apparent passivity (5). In 1904, the American critic Paul Elmer More wrote in Atlantic Monthly that her spirit was “always refined and exquisite in sentiment,” but that in much of her poetry, compared “with the works of the more creative poets, her song is like the continuous lisping of an Aeolian harp beside the music elicited by cunning fingers” (815). More’s assessment seems typical of Rossetti’s treatment at the hands of early critics, including her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

As late as the 1960s and 1970s, Rossetti was viewed as a passive, non-intellectual woman and poet of mediocre talent, whose poetry was marked by “pervasive sentimentality and tiresome self-pity” (Curran 287). In 1971, critic Stuart Curran wrote that “this woman's tone is too often merely effeminate, weak and nebulous” (6). He damns her with faint praise, writing that she has “the not inconsiderable gift of felicitous
music,” but that she “falls back on pretty language, the bane of so many women poets…” (Curran 298). Curran calls *Goblin Market* remarkable, but says that it “cannot sustain itself,” and though it is “a technical tour-de-force…the mind behind the poem is implacably shallow, [and] the powerful implications of this fable of sensual possession are resolved into a panegyric for sisterly love, and what begins as a startling complement to Poe and Baudelaire settles stiffly into a Victorian parlor” (288). In a startlingly sexist summary, Curran calls her a “girl” who “meant very little by her song,” and whose mastery of form was “only a pretty veneer” (288).

Curran’s view may now seem astonishing in its sexism, but it provides an important clue to why the complex ideas and identities embedded in Rossetti’s poems were so long overlooked by critics: the poems simply suffered the unavoidable failings of having been written by a “girl.” Antony Harrison writes in his 1988 critical study that “despite Rossetti’s deliberate assertions that a commitment to the poetic vocation was of primary importance in her life, critics until very recently have been reluctant to view her as a writer fully devoted to her craft” (1). One of the assertions to which Harrison refers is in an 1854 letter to William Edmonston Aytoun, a contributing editor of *Blackwood’s Magazine*. On August 1 of that year, Rossetti sent him six new poems along with what Harrison calls a “startlingly self-assertive cover letter” (1). Harrison quotes a portion of that letter: “poetry is with me, not a mechanism, but an impulse and a reality; and that I know my aims in writing to be pure, and directed to that which is true and right” (1). That statement goes some distance toward contesting the idea that she saw herself a casual lady scribbler—as Harrison writes, she was in fact “a determined and careful artist whose
unremitting ambition was to fulfill her potential to generate perfected poetic artifacts” (1). That interpretation of her character and work contributes to a reading of *Goblin Market* as (among other things), a very precisely directed and carefully constructed work of satiric and subversive fantasy.

A more balanced view of the complexity of Rossetti’s accomplishment began to emerge with the appearance of later biographical studies in the wake of the Second Wave Women’s Movement that began in the 1970s. Katherine Mayberry’s 1989 biography reveals that Rossetti’s longtime editor, Alexander Macmillan, called her a “true artist” and claimed that her reputation as such would live on (Mayberry 11). Macmillan wasn’t alone; Rossetti was even considered for the post of Poet Laureate and wrote an elegy to contend for the position—but had become gravely ill and would almost certainly have declined the offer had it been made. As it was, she was passed over for Alfred Austin, possibly simply due to sexism (which was not limited to the Victorians; it would be 2009 before England selected its first woman Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy). Mayberry’s biography presents further evidence with respect to Rossetti’s reconciliation of femininity, faith, and courage: at the age of 24, Rossetti wanted to go to war. She wanted to be a battlefield nurse under Florence Nightingale, but was turned away as too young. After that, she did charity work in a shelter for fallen women. She had two chances to marry, but broke both engagements. Earlier critics have claimed that her refusal to marry was a sign of sexual repression and a fear of adult life, but the story of Rossetti’s life does not suggest a woman who was afraid of life; she doesn't appear to have been afraid of anything, except (according to her letters) her tax forms.
D’Amico refutes the idea that Rossetti was a cowering neurotic, afraid to love:

As several critics have convincingly argued, Rossetti’s poems on love and marriage challenge the patriarchal ideology of her time and suggest that she was, especially during the 1850s and 1860s, engaging in a harsh analysis of Victorian marriage. Although Rossetti indeed viewed the Victorian marriage market as a place of competition and betrayal, such a cynical view does not represent the full range of her thoughts on human love or even on marriage. For example, “Goblin Market” (1859) and “Maiden Song” (1863), two of her most significant narrative poems, close with the traditional marriage ending, and in both poems sisterly love, not rivalry, is central in bringing about the final domestic scenes. (D’Amico 67-68)

Furthermore, Rossetti was connected with a number of women that Jan Marsh describes as being “in the vanguard of a new feminism,” (qtd. In Kent and Stanwood 7). Anthony Harrison “believes that Rossetti articulated a distinctive, antipatriarchal point of view in many of her devotional prose works by providing ‘a quietly comprehensive attack on the entire network of patriarchal values which even the most stringent social critics of her day normally accept without question…”’ (Kent and Stanwood 7). This “distinctive, antipatriarchal point of view” was not limited to her prose, nor to her purely devotional works. Harrison goes on to suggest that “by embracing religious values with a uniquely radical fervor…Rossetti’s work undercuts the domestic ideology of middle and upper-class Victorians, and functions to subvert both the patriarchal values that governed
Victorian England and their extension into industrial capitalism” (qtd. in Kent and Stanwood 7).

In “The Lowest Room,” for example, which is simply a poem about an older and younger sister discussing their lives, one sister says to the other:

She laughed again, my sister laughed;
Made answer o'er the laboured cloth:
"I would rather be one of us
Than wife, or slave, or both."

Harrison’s view to some extent reflects those of feminist literary theorists who sought to expand the canon to include authors who had previously been almost ignored, specifically “minor” female poets and novelists like Rossetti. But as D’Amico notes, feminist criticism of Rossetti tended to fall into four distinct approaches. The first tends to present Rossetti’s faith as a sign of sexual repression; Germaine Greer, writing in 1995, accuses Rossetti of sublimating her sexuality in religion, to the detriment of her art. Greer writes that Rossetti “consciously or unconsciously…used the aspirations of piety as a metaphor for her own frustrated sexuality. As a Victorian woman she is simply typical in this respect” (360). Greer’s view seems surprisingly reductive and dismissive for a feminist scholar whose reputation was largely built on advocating women’s empowerment. A second approach avoids the assumption that sexuality and creativity are inextricably connected, reading Rossetti’s faith simply as a source of poetic inspiration. Yet a third represents her faith as a “device for overcoming the difficulty of being a woman in Victorian England” (D’Amico 9). The fourth feminist approach is the most
interesting: it reads Rossetti’s poetry as pointedly questioning the domination of the nineteenth-century patriarchy. Some recent critics among this group, such as Lynda Pallazzo and Marjorie Stone, see Rossetti as a subversive, fiercely intelligent feminist.

I would argue that this latter reading of Rossetti is the one most capable of revealing the multivalent complexities of a poem like “Goblin Market,” although her faith and submission should not be ignored or belittled. I propose that to whom or what one surrenders, and the manner of the surrender, makes all the difference. Rossetti was not a saint, nor was she repressed (at least not more so than most people of the time); she was a feminist according to her time and her nature, and more importantly, one who recognized in the fantastic a mechanism for embedding her feminism in a culturally acceptable mode. Poetry with “a minimum of intellectual substance” was widely regarded as a hallmark of Victorian female poets, and as D’Amico contends, had a respected place; however, it was not considered bold or innovative by critics of the time (5). Some contemporary critics did not consider Rossetti a strong poet because her poems did not typically demonstrate traditionally masculine values, yet her brother Dante criticized her poem “The Lower Room” for being too masculine.

In the end, only those critics and historians who viewed her as a minor poet were badly mistaken. Far from being completely unaware and passive, Rossetti possessed an active and subtle voice that not only expressed her own anxieties and concerns, but provided a telling critique of her cultural moment. Rossetti was an artist first, but was not indifferent to the social issues of her day, or even to the issues within her own family. Among other things, her work served as a poetic rebuttal to the politics and poetry of the
Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood—with a distinct awareness of the gender emphasis of *brotherhood*.

Rossetti knew the power of language, and indeed she considered people to be “vulnerable” to it. She considered it a dangerous mistake to argue over scriptural trivia and overlook the main points, but she was extremely concerned with “analyzing … ‘symbolic language accommodated to human apprehension’” (Kent and Stanwood 11). There is little doubt that “Goblin Market” is a carefully constructed if ambiguous satire. There may be a sacred reading in the poem, but the more profitable question is, how can Rossetti’s devotion be reconciled with the other, more overtly sexual, elements that are obviously present? Any apparent opacity on Rossetti’s part is not deliberate obscurity for obscurity’s sake, but rather the result of multiple meanings, some overt, some encoded. In the sections that follow, I will explore those multiple meanings, first in terms of the apparent conflict between the devotional and erotic aspects of the poem, and then in terms of what I regard as Rossetti’s most radical use of the fantastic in subtly addressing the role of women in Victorian society, and in particular how this is reflected in her own family and her problematical relationship with her brother Dante Gabriel.

**The Multivalent Fantastic: “Goblin Market” as Christian Fairy-Tale?**

If Rossetti was open-minded and somewhat subversive about the role of women in Victorian society, which her own poetry demonstrates unequivocally, she also found other uses for the fantastic as a rhetorical tool. Perhaps the greatest strength of “Goblin
“Goblin Market” is not its lush imagery or its evocative tempo, but its openness to multivalent interpretations. Readings emphasizing sisterhood and sensuality have been very popular among feminist critics in recent years, and in exploring those readings we can achieve a greater understanding of how Rossetti operated within her spheres as a poet, a sister, and an unmarried woman. But before re-examinations of her poetry through the dual lenses of feminism and the fantastic revealed a hidden radicalism, much of the discussion of “Goblin Market” centered on the poem’s apparently paradoxical celebration of both Christian devotion and female sexuality. There is significant support for a religious reading of “Goblin Market”, as well an erotic one—yet I would argue that these multiple approaches merely provide further evidence of Rossetti’s realization of the power of the fantastic as a vehicle for complex ideas.

D’Amico makes a compelling case for a Christian fairy-tale reading of the poem, but she herself agrees that Rossetti should not be read quite so simply. D’Amico points out that Rossetti is concerned, like Stoker later in the century, with the soul as well as the body, citing scriptural allusions and language that would have coded a terrible threat for the Victorian audience. “To a reader familiar with biblical allusion and language, Rossetti’s sensuous descriptions immediately signal a spiritual warning. Such a reader immediately realizes that the goblins are not primarily interested in Laura’s body. Rather, through the seduction of the body, they hope to destroy her soul” (70). D’Amico argues that, in the scene between Laura and Lizzie when Laura recovers her health, Laura’s recovery is basically spiritual; “She no longer writhes like ‘one possessed,’ nor does she
kiss Lizzie with ‘a hungry mouth.’ Rather she hugs Lizzie only once, ‘not twice or thrice’” (79).

This scene has also been read as a frankly sexual scene, and the recovery as post-coital languor—and when the remedy for a goblin’s curse is licking fruit-juice from the healer’s lips, it is difficult to avoid asking whether the author intended that image as any other than sensual. Margaret Homans even argues that this is what has given the poem its classic status. “‘Goblin Market’ has become canonical for considerations both of the thematics of female sexuality and of the thematics of female voice,” she writes, describing it as “a poem thematically about female-centered sexuality” and calling attention to lines that seem to celebrate lesbian passion, such as Lizzie’s demand to Laura, after returning home, to "Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices" (586-88).

D’Amico responds:

In arguing for a reading of the passionate scene between Lizzie and Laura as a scene of sacred rather than erotic love, I am not claiming that Rossetti sees the body and its instincts in entirely negative terms. Certainly, though she was always suspicious of the senses and believed that bodily desires needed to be disciplined, she did not reject the body; in other words, she did not see it as evil. (79)

It is entirely possible to reconcile the spiritual or sacred with the sexual or sensual in scripture, and Rossetti would have been aware of this. There are a number of passages
in her poetry in which spouses are encouraged to take joy in their marriage partners, an order some readers interpret as meaning merely living happily together and producing offspring, but her allusions to the Song of Solomon in such poems as “The Prince’s Progress” belie this simple interpretation. So, too, do some of Rossetti’s own spiritual poems, such as the sonnet sequence “Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets,” from which the following lines are taken:

I love Him more, so let me love you too;
Yea, as I apprehend it, love is such
I cannot love you if I love not Him,
I cannot love Him if I love not you.

One can infer here that Rossetti was working toward a reconciliation of the spiritual and the erotic, at least in some of her poetry. However, it is fair to note, as Kent and Stanwood do, that “Rossetti’s feminist tendencies were in uneasy tension with the tenets of her faith, and she was not fully able to resolve the conflict” (8). In other words, Rossetti may have been torn not only between her faith and her desires, but between her faith and her nascent feminism. In fact, the mechanism through which Rossetti is finally able to reconcile these disparate elements is through the use of the fantastic, of imagery

Ephesians 5:22-33 discusses love within marriage, in terms of the body. Having been enjoined to treat marriage as becoming one flesh, marital partners—in this case the husbands—are instructed to love their wives as their own bodies, for no one ever hates one’s own flesh. Then the Song of Songs depicts the beauty of courtship and romantic love, which suggests that asceticism is not the only possible tone for a biblical interpretation of Rossetti’s poetry.
which itself is as multivalent as her intentions in the poem. Her goblins are at once symbols of spiritual threat, of the psychological threat of separation, and of male dominance and manipulation.

D’Amico calls attention to Laura’s bodily health in the final stanza of “Goblin Market,” a section to which many critics have given a great deal of consideration. As D’Amico points out, critics now find the end of the poem to be a complication—it doesn’t really fit neatly with many of the feminist, lesbian, or more sensually oriented readings of the poem. I believe that it is a sly, subversive reversal of the most overt themes of the poem, and when we consider the layered alternate readings, it is the last piece of a complex puzzle that is intended to confound readers. D’Amico writes:

Many twentieth-century readers, especially those who see the poem as an affirmation of women’s sensuality, find this ending problematic. By ending, I am here referring to both the fact of Laura’s loving motherhood and the nurserylike poem …which she offers the children and with which “Goblin Market” concludes. For some, such an ending is a sentimental affirmation of the Victorian values that keep women from the goblin glen and confine them to the home. Others argue that Rossetti does not quite mean what she writes and that “Goblin Market” triumphs over its moral ending by assuring its readers that women do have a right to buy goblin fruit. However, if “Goblin Market” is not just about a woman’s body, but about the soul and body, then Laura’s motherhood and her concluding song are entirely appropriate. (80)
D’Amico’s core argument is that Rossetti was religious, and she was—but there was nothing in her doctrine that forbade the reconciliation of sensuality, courage, sisterly love, and motherhood, and her use of fantastic imagery provided her a convenient mechanism through which to accomplish this. One woman could do a lot, as Rossetti herself was proof. We can allow that Rossetti may have needed to remain circumspect with some of her opinions, but much criticism fails to acknowledge that Rossetti, like most people, may have felt conflicted or ambivalent at times. But we know from her letters to Dante Gabriel that she was broadminded enough to have been quite deliberate in her treatment of spirituality and eroticism.

The mere fact that Rossetti associates Lizzie with Christ queers the familiar gender roles of the Victorian era. A reader who sees Lizzie as mirroring Christ might either view this as recognizing the feminine aspect in Christ’s self, or see Lizzie’s sisterly sacrifice in masculine terms—that is, might see Lizzie acting not like a heroine but a hero. By employing a female character as a Christ figure, Rossetti challenges those Victorian readers who, in a society that regarded women as inferior creatures, might easily have disregarded women’s spiritual equality with men (76). This is very far from the traditional, domesticated “angel in the house.” Lizzie not only leaves the house, she goes forth into the glen, hunting goblin men. She is, if not quite on a traditional fantasy quest, at least seeking access to the world of the goblins to free her sister, who has become bound to that world, not unlike the folktale of Tam Lin (which has also provided inspiration for a number of later feminist fantasy novels).
Rossetti was certainly artistically sophisticated enough to have written into the text all of the Christian imagery that D’Amico (and others) have pointed out (74), while at the same time employing the sensual images and motifs that compel the second reading. That doesn’t necessarily suggest that Rossetti was unknowingly conflicted or confused, but rather subtly invites an examination of patriarchal assumptions about spirituality and sexuality. By thus linking the sacred to the sensual and sexual, Rossetti reveals herself to be an incisive theologian who nevertheless recognized that there were some things she was better off not saying outright. This idea of overlaying the Christian imagery with the imagery of sublimated desire is one area where it might have seemed prudent to have plausible deniability, while at the same time inviting readers to endlessly generate interpretations, But neither of these views of “Goblin Market”—situating it in the familiar company of the Victorian Christian fairy tale or viewing it through the clinical lens of psychosexual theory—adequately explain the continuing power of the poem for the modern reader, and in particular for the modern feminist. For that, we need to turn to the decidedly patriarchal context in which the poem was written, and explore the ways in which Rossetti uses the materials of fantastika to interrogate, and in some ways subvert, that context.
Christina Among the Goblins: Patriarchy and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

“Goblin Market” presents a set of powerful ideas, carefully crafted to avoid the appearance of an open threat to the dominant social order; it is, in a sense, what Homans calls “a negotiation between the woman poet and the androcentric tradition” (590). In other poems, and even in her works for children, Rossetti has been credited with unusual complexity and subtle “satire and parody of Victorian values” (Kent and Stanwood 3). But “Goblin Market” poses a more specific question, particularly in reference to the “goblin men” themselves and the Pre-Raphaelites to whom they may have slyly alluded. We are told that the goblins pose a real danger to maidens:

Twilight is not good for maidens;
Should not loiter in the glen
In the haunts of goblin men.
Do you not remember Jeanie,
How she met them in the moonlight,
Took their gifts both choice and many,
Ate their fruits and wore their flowers
Pluck’d from bowers
Where summer ripens at all hours?
But ever in the moonlight
She pined and pined away;
Sought them by night and day,
Found them no more, but dwindled and grew grey;
Then fell with the first snow,
While to this day no grass will grow
Where she lies low: (12)

The prevailing image of the Victorian maiden was one of fragility and submission to male hegemony, not least in art and literature. Christina found herself assigned such roles throughout her life, but most visibly among the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood headed by her brother Dante Gabriel.

When Christina was a young woman, her father fell ill and could not work, so other family members had to take on gainful employment. This included her mother, who resumed teaching. Only Dante Gabriel’s career as an artist was considered so important that he was not asked to find other work. Katherine Mayberry writes of Christina that “when her youth no longer excused her from joining the family’s efforts to remain solvent, she became ill” (5-6). Since she did not seem to have insisted upon her right to work outside the home; nursing her father was a natural alternative even with her own illnesses—and pursuing a career as a poet, which was still possible given these constraints, must have been more attractive both in terms of daily life and as a more productive long-term goal.

Between 1848 and 1854, the circumstances of Christina’s life were complicated by both religion and offers of marriage; her actions with respect to both are important, and intertwined, but the most likely conclusion is that Christina Rossetti did not want to get married. In 1848, she became engaged to James Collinson, a Pre-Raphaelite brother of no particular distinction. Their engagement was not visibly enthusiastic; several
volumes’ worth of her correspondence with family and friends survives, but no letters to or from Collinson. As Mayberry suggests, perhaps there weren’t any (7). The engagement was rather short; Christina revoked her consent in 1849, because Collinson returned to the Catholic Church. Later, in 1866, she received a proposal from Charles Cayley, which she declined, again claiming religious reasons. He was agnostic, and Christina was still a devoted Tractarian\textsuperscript{28} Anglo-Catholic—the incompatibility being enough to settle the matter (or possibly give her an excuse).\textsuperscript{29}

The year her father died—between her two marriage proposals—Christina applied to join Florence Nightingale’s nursing corps on the Crimean front. It is worth noting that two years prior, Nightingale had written the essay “Cassandra,” a scathing criticism of current social conventions, marriage among them:

\begin{quote}
The intercourse of man and woman—how frivolous, how unworthy it is!

Can we call that the true vocation of woman—her high career? Look
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{28} The Tractarians were also known as the Oxford movement, which was in many ways incompatible with casual Anglicanism. The movement was founded by Anglicans who had become extremely dissatisfied by the lack of seriousness in the establishment Anglican Church; the clergy and academics who founded the movement wished to return to an appreciation of the Catholic heritage of the church, particularly its pre-Reformation historical and theological insights.

\textsuperscript{29} In fact, that Rossetti’s Anglican beliefs included a strong conviction in the unity of the body and the soul, quoting Rossetti’s own words from \textit{The Face of the Deep}: “It pleased Christ to redeem us whole, whence we know that our whole being is capable of serving God acceptably. Our body, our soul, our spirit, are all His and endowed for His service” (184) (qtd. in D’Amico 80).
round at the marriages which you know. The true marriage—that noble union, by which man and woman become together the one perfect being—probably does not exist at present upon earth. (44)

In her 1979 introduction to the essay, Myra Stark wrote that “it was not at all surprising that many well-to-do Victorian women who, like Florence Nightingale, were restless for serious occupation, should have turned to charity: it was considered ladylike and had social approval” (10). Rossetti’s attempt to follow Nightingale indicates admiration for her aims, as well as probable agreement with her assessment of matrimony. The nursing corps rejected her application, judging her too young.³⁰ By the time she was old enough, the war was over, but she did eventually find a serious charitable pursuit. Some ladies visited poor families with baskets of food, or called on the sick, but in 1860, at the age of 30, Christina began working at the Highgate House of Charity for “fallen women.” Her choice was an acute reflection of her awareness of and commitment to social problems, a commitment reflected in some of her poetry, most notably “Goblin Market” in 1862.

In her poetry, Christina Rossetti resists the sort of male domination she had experienced much of her life. In her poetry lie subversion and even defiance, both in the mere fact of its publication and in the subjects chosen. The fairy-tale horror of the subject matter of “Goblin Market” should not be trivialized: like Dracula a few decades later, Rossetti’s goblins were a threat to both body and soul, and many readers overlook that in

³⁰ She was 24 years old.
the happy ending, one maiden, Jeanie, did in fact die, with no sister to save her. There is every manner of implied violence just below the surface of the poem, and in their own way the goblins are as much a threat to personal identity and autonomy as Dracula would later prove to be to the Crew of Light. And like Dracula, they are fantastical figures with real-world correlates.

Even in her adult life, Rossetti had her own goblins to contend with. She was unable to gain entrance to the meetings of the Brotherhood, but she at least struck back at the notion that the Brothers could admit the poetry but not the poet: she forbade them to read her work in her absence. Dante Gabriel’s “help” with her career included ill-timed releases of her books, as well as what Parker calls “a form of censorship” (316). Compounding the muting effect of his dubious editorial aid was Dante Gabriel’s treatment of her name; he was quite particular about his own byline, but less so about Christina’s: he “invented the pseudonym of ‘Ellen Alleyn’ for his sister and published her poems under that name—without obtaining her prior permission” (Parker 318). By 1860, thanks to the combined efforts of her brother and the male-dominated publishing industry, she had written hundreds of poems, yet remained effectively a nonentity to the reading public (318).

However, Christina was not passive. She opposed Dante for nearly twenty years over the poem “The Lowest Room,” about two sisters and their respective roles in society. It had been written in 1856, but was not published until 1875. He objected to the gender-bending tone of the piece, and presented it as a criticism of the poem itself:
William Rossetti cites [Dante’s] 1875 letter in response to the collected edition of the *Goblin Market and Prince's Progress*: "A real taint, to some extent, of modern vicious style, derived from that same source (Mrs. Browning)—what might be called a falsetto muscularity—always seemed to me much too prominent in the long piece called The Lowest Room. . . ."

“ (Rosenblum 47)

Dolores Rosenblum further says that “despite her brother's strong disapproval, Rossetti retained the poem in all subsequent editions” (47).

Dante Gabriel also objected to “Under the Rose,” a poem about life as an illegitimate daughter “trapped in a situation of maximum alienation by the ties of patriarchy” (Rosenblum 49). Despite her brother’s feelings about her subject, Christina trusted her own judgment and published the poem. Although Rosenblum writes that Dante Gabriel found the “coarseness” of the subject disturbing, he himself had written the poem “Jenny” about a prostitute, the same sort of “fallen woman” Christina wrote about and encountered in her charity work. This suggests that his objections had less to do with the subject than the ideologies behind his own and Christina’s respective portrayals of the women. His own poem was an act of ventriloquism, about the man more than the woman.

Dante Gabriel’s vision came into recurring conflict with Christina’s; his desire to see women as he wished them to be was at the core of his art, and that she was aware of this near-obsession is apparent in her poems, letters, and journals. In *Sexual Personae*, Camille Paglia reports that William Holman Hunt (with whom Rossetti shared a studio) said that Rossetti tended to:
convert the features of his sitter to his favourite ideal type, and if he finished on these lines, the drawing was extremely charming, even if you had to make-believe a good deal to see the likeness, while if the sitter's features would not lend themselves to the pre-ordained form, he went through a stage of reluctant twisting of lines and quantities to make the drawing satisfactory. (491)

Scholarship in the last ten years has shed some light on the dynamic between Christina and Dante Gabriel. In particular, Emma Parker’s essay from Women’s Writing in 1998 is very revealing, almost shocking from a modern feminist perspective. She argues that Dante Gabriel exercised, or tried to exercise, an almost autocratic control over his sister’s career. According to the letters that passed between Christina and Dante Gabriel, he was supportive and helpful in some ways, but other evidence suggests that he was occasionally as much a hindrance as a help. He “selected poems for publication, often changing their titles, and even sent “Goblin Market” to his friend John Ruskin, who “found the poem ‘full of beauty and power,’ but too full of ‘quaintnesses and offences’ for publication” (Reeves 65). Like William, he liaised with publishers and dealt with business transactions,” and Christina “was strictly excluded from the all-male meetings known as ‘tobacco parliaments’ held in the editor’s office at Macmillan’s, as well as from the meetings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood at which her work was discussed” (Parker 314).

What seems to have actually been the case, with respect to Rossetti’s identity as a “determined and careful artist” and as the younger sister of a famous brother, was that she
actively steered the course of her career, but accepted much of his advice. However, he
does seem to have enacted some changes on his own, without her approval. In those
cases, she did not fly into a passion; she seems to have loved her brother very much,
although that doesn’t mean she accepted everything he did to her work without her
advance approval. Where some would suggest she was weak, let me suggest she was
diplomatic, as was Mary Shelley in regard to her husband Percy’s emendations to her
initial draft of Frankenstein.

As this excerpt from a letter, dated 01 December, 1863, to Alexander Macmillan
suggests, she very much preferred a non-confrontational approach as concerned her
writing:

> Few things within the range of probability would give me greater pleasure
> than to **hand** see in print my second volume: but I am sadly convinced that
> I have not by me materials, equal both in quantity and quality, to what are
> already before the public. And, if one conviction can go beyond another, I
> am yet more firmly convinced that my system of not writing against the
> grain is the right one, at any rate as concerns myself. (Rossetti)

Yet it is demonstrably true that distaste for direct confrontation did not prevent her from
persisting in her endeavors, nor from remaining true to her artistic vision.

Terry Spaise’s 1997 article “Not ‘as She Fulfills His Dreams’ but ‘as She Is’: The
Feminist Voice of Christina Rossetti” goes a little further in its investigation of
Christina’s attitude toward her brother Dante: Christina’s poem “In an Artist’s Studio”
has been read as specifically critical of her brother’s tendency to present one unchanging,
perfect woman of otherworldly beauty, time and again. In her reading of “In an Artist’s Studio,” Spaise describes both Dante Gabriel’s romanticized woman and Christina’s reaction to her:

Christina rightly saw [her] as a dream vision which could never truly exist or be obtained by any man. This woman has ideal loveliness, both in physical and moral terms. She is a queen, a saint, an angel; beautiful to look at, she is also adoring and pure. Yet Rossetti shatters this ideal image created in the opening quatrains in the sestet in which she forces the reader to view Dante Gabriel’s actions in a very different and destructive light—both to the woman and to himself. (59)

It is possible that one woman might possess all of those qualities, but as Christina was well aware, Dante Gabriel was far less interested in the reality of his models’ faces than in the single, idealized face he held obsessively in his imagination, which “In an Artist’s Studio” makes perfectly clear:

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,
A saint, an angel—every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

Written in 1890, years after Dante Gabriel’s death, the poem probably refers to his combined fixations on his dead wife, Elizabeth Siddal, and Jane Morris, for whom he had an intense passion. Paglia writes that “It is as if the artist were in bondage to Poe's Ligeia, whose image vanquishes all living women. Like Leonardo, Rossetti was under enchantment by some archetypal original . . .” Ford Madox Brown (under whom Rossetti studied for a time) called his extraordinary degree of focus a monomania (Paglia 491).

Given Dante’s problematical and idealized view of women, “Goblin Market,” with its portrayal of the sisters Laura and Lizzie, emerges not only as Christina’s masterpiece of subversive art disguised in the apparently innocent language of the fantastic, but as a more personal act of gender rebellion. Her persistent, low-key resistance to Dante Gabriel is clearly reflected in Lizzie’s stoic, vindicating steadfastness against the goblins’ multifarious assaults. Thwarted by her refusal to accede compliantly to their demands, the goblins become viciously insistent:

One call'd her proud,
Cross-grain'd, uncivil;
Their tones wax'd loud,
Their looks were evil.
Lashing their tails
They trod and hustled her,
Elbow'd and jostled her,
Claw'd with their nails,
Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,
Tore her gown and soil'd her stocking,
Twitch'd her hair out by the roots,
Stamp'd upon her tender feet,
Held her hands and squeeze'd their fruits
Against her mouth to make her eat. (22)

In her quiet defiance, Lizzie shows the goblins that they cannot force their fruits past her lips; Christina Rossetti is effectively saying to the goblin men who surround her, “do not put words into my mouth, do not presume to tell me what I feel—I will not swallow your version of my sex, my life, or my poetry.” Christina publicly maintained that “Goblin Market” was only a fairytale, but that is misleading if not disingenuous; it’s entirely possible that Christina was well aware of the multivalent and potentially subversive aspect of the fairy tale form, and that a term like “only a fairy tale” comes with a certain weight of irony. Almost as if to underline this irony, the poem ends with a straightforward and mundane homily about sisterhood.

Christina Rossetti resisted Dante Gabriel’s interference when she disagreed with his advice, but she wasn’t always able to have her own way; as we have noted, she had to
give in to him over “The Lower Room,” publishing it only after twenty years of
disagreement. The length of time it took her to get the poem into print, and the fact that it
was not originally titled “The Lower Room,” suggests that direct confrontation was an
ineffective tool for breaking into the male-dominated world of poetry. In the meantime,
she tried another way, negotiating with the masculine world by circumventing her
brother’s sensibilities rather than running headlong against them. Gender non-conformity
(in her own way) and “fallen” women were important to her, and she would write about
them, and publish what she wrote. She was nothing if not persistent. Christina Rossetti
spent a lifetime subtly undercutting the ideology of patriarchy by art and by misdirection,
and her most effective tool for doing that, in “Goblin Market,” was through the use of
fantastic images and events which permitted both safely conventional interpretations and
slyly subversive ones.

By choosing the popular Victorian narrative form of the fairy tale, most
commonly associated with children’s literature, she was able to confront some of the
central issues of her age, mostly in regard to the role of women, through fantasy imagery
that conveyed both intense sensuality and intense horror without, at least on the surface,
seeming to challenge the dogmas of the time. Her claim that “Goblin Market” was only a
fairy tale may be one of her most subversive claims of all. While it is true that earlier or
contemporary Victorian fairytales tended to serve largely as didactic moral fables (such
as Charles Kingsley’s “The Water Babies,” published a year after “Goblin Market”),
Rossetti saw the darker, more critical possibilities of the form, crucially recognizing its
capacity for illuminating not just the anxieties of children, but the actual lives of women.
This has led one scholar of fairytales, Jonathan Cott, to describe it as “probably the most extreme and most beautifully elaborated example of repressed eroticism in children’s literature,” while at the same time noting that “it is hard to imagine that the poem was intended specifically for children” (466). While we have already seen the problems inherent in a simplistic “repressed eroticism” reading of the poem, Cott’s second point, that the poem could hardly have been intended entirely for children, is almost certainly valid: Rossetti had in fact discovered a means of encoding complex social and gender issues in the apparently innocent form of the fairy tale. Her discovery may not have led directly to the darker, more socially conscious tone of later Victorian fairy stories like George MacDonald’s *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) or the stories of Lucy Lane Clifford in the 1880s, but it was certainly among the earliest works to develop a rhetorical strategy for what would, more than a century later, become the vital and prolific genre of feminist fantasy narratives.

In many ways, it is not surprising that Rossetti should find ways to encode feminist ideas and concerns in a seemingly fanciful narrative. Victorian women were overwhelmingly defined by their relationships with men: daughter, mother, sister, niece, or wife. Although the imbalance between male and female populations at the beginning of the nineteenth century meant that a great many women must remain unmarried, the most acceptable pattern for a woman’s life was to be passed from father to husband on her wedding day. Alternatives were sparse for most women; becoming a governess was an acceptable consolation prize, but open rebellion against the marriage market was a rough way to go even for women whose natures admitted the possibility of defiance.
Intellectuals and women of means had more options, namely flight and subversion. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, daughter of two important reformers of the day, chose to live in Italy, away from the strictures of British society, for as long as she could. She and other female members of the intelligentsia like Rossetti did their best work by subverting, often quite subtly, the dominant patriarchal order. Art and literature were enormously helpful to them; coming from intellectual families gave women like Mary Shelley, George Eliot, and Christina Rossetti the resources to understand masculine cultural tools, and to use them as tools of resistance.

Christina Rossetti could not, or did not wish to, break entirely with her society or with her brothers—but neither was she willing to accept uncritically the assigned roles of a Victorian woman, and in particular the role of lady poet. She did not marry, nor did she submit to the heavy-handed critical or career advice from her acclaimed brother. Nor, more importantly, did she let his ideological fantasies about the idealization of women go unanswered. And, in the end, her instincts proved sound, as did the claim of her longtime editor, Alexander Macmillan, that she was a “true artist” whose reputation would live on (Mayberry 11).

Macmillan wasn’t alone among his contemporaries, as Rossetti’s candidacy for Poet Laureate proves. (She may not have been selected, but the fact that she became one of the first women ever to be considered for the position remains a testament to her impact among her contemporaries.) Most importantly, in “Goblin Market,” she discovered significant new uses for the rhetoric of fantasy, becoming in the process, arguably, one of the very first feminist fantasists in which the agency of rescue is not the
traditional male woodsman of “Little Red Riding Hood,” but rather a sister, and in which males themselves are portrayed less as rescuers than as hazards from which to be rescued.

Rossetti produced not only one of the great dark poems of the mid-Victorian period, but one of its most effective, and affecting, horror stories as well, and one that prefigured complex later rhetorical uses of folkloristic fantasy as surely as *Frankenstein* prefigured science fiction or *Dracula* literary horror.
Chapter Four

Bram Stoker: Dracula and the Crises of Empire

Bram Stoker’s Dracula might accurately be said to touch on both of the previous themes treated in this dissertation—the possibilities and limitations of science and the role of women in society—while introducing a significant new locus of anxiety: the integrity of British society in the face of threats from abroad. If Frankenstein used a fabulous monster to critique ideas of science and education, and “Goblin Market” used grotesque figures from folklore to explore the issue of women’s agency, Stoker finds in his monster a different kind of threat, that of invasion and pollution. Like his predecessors, he found in the fantastic a means of indirectly exploring and critiquing a dominant national anxiety.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century the issues of identity and empire were critical sources of such anxiety, in addition to the growing role of science and education and the question of women in society. These loci of unease were still hotspots in Britain’s psychological landscape when Stoker wrote Dracula, and all are evident in the novel, but for many recent critics the question of national identity achieves primacy in the text. This, I believe, is a valid and useful approach, although as I hope to demonstrate, this question grows considerably more complex when one considers Stoker’s dual Irish and British loyalties. While the issue of technology is clearly important to Dracula, (newfangled
recording devices and typewriters are among the tools characters use), and while Mina Harker can be viewed as the New Woman with professional ambitions, the villain himself is clearly old school—the evil count who is above all else, foreign.

While *Dracula* touches upon a number of key social issues, it is the Count’s foreignness that is the key to the novel’s exploration of internal and external threats to imperial identity, and to Stoker’s repurposing of horror to interrogate a surprisingly broad variety of social issues. As Nina Auerbach observes, “Dracula is in love less with death or sexuality than with hierarchies, erecting barriers hitherto foreign to vampire literature; the gulf between male and female, antiquity and newness, class and class, England and non-England, vampire and mortal, homoerotic and heterosexual love, infuses its genre with a new fear: fear of the hated unknown (67). In the figure of the Count, Stoker invented a perfectly ambiguous antagonist to reflect the reader’s own constructions of anxiety: the Count could be read as Jewish or as Irish with equal legitimacy, and both readings reflect the intense disquiet of the Anglo-British over the subject of policing the Imperial borders and preserving the city-state.

As with Rossetti in “Goblin Market,” Stoker’s agenda is never made explicit. His goal was not to tell the reader what to think, but rather to stimulate critical thought through the evocation of horror and dread. The Count is a template for the disquiet of the Victorian age, a blank screen upon which to project a variety of anxieties. While much of the critical commentary on *Dracula* has focused on the Count’s alienness, I hope to demonstrate that the nature of that alienness is more complex than it may first seem, and varies depending on whether we view Stoker from a British or an Irish perspective. The
foreigner as Gothic villain was already a familiar figure in Victorian literature—one thinks of Ann Radcliffe’s Montoni or Wilkie Collins’s Count Fosco—but Stoker introduced a new dimension of complexity and ambiguity into this figure, paving the way for later writers of literary horror to explore questions both of character and of broader social anxieties.

Stoker’s mechanism for addressing these anxieties was a mode of fantastic fiction—the horror story—more often associated with pure sensation rather than with a literature of ideas, and which was often associated with the “novel of sensation” craze that began in the 1860s following the publication of Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* in 1860. An anonymous critic in an 1897 review in the *Spectator* somewhat facetiously gave a new name to the genre in which he placed *Dracula*:

Mr. Bram Stoker gives us the impression—we may be doing him an injustice—of having deliberately laid himself out in *Dracula* to eclipse all previous efforts in the domain of the horrible,—to “go one better” than Wilkie Collins (whose method of narration he has closely followed), Sheridan Le Fanu, and all the other professors of the flesh-creeping school. (*Dracula* 365)

The “flesh-creeping school” may not have garnered a lot of critical attention or respect until relatively recently, but it is capable of producing both memorable characters and, in Stoker’s hands, memorable lessons in the uses of fear; Nicholas Daly’s useful “productive fear” theory allows us to suggest that *Dracula* “[uses] fear toward a particular end, rather than [expresses] it” (46).
We know from biographical materials that Stoker was concerned with issues of empire and colonialism; as an Anglo-Irish man, he had a dual perspective as both the colonizer and the colonized. It does not seem unusual that these concerns should permeate his fiction. We also know that, although he phrased it mildly, Stoker had some ideas about the didactic value of fiction. He is on record for claiming two things—that there are lessons in novels, and that he will leave it to the reader to discover what they are:

…Mrs. Boyd-Carpenter wrote to Stoker praising the novel as “an allegory of sin” directed against “those whose belles-lettres repel,” she also worried that she might be “reading more into it than you meant.” Stoker’s reply seems not to have survived, yet in response to a similar question from an interviewer a few days earlier “he would give no definite answer.” “I suppose that every book of the kind must contain some lesson,” he remarked; “but I prefer that readers should find it out for themselves.”

(Glover 4)

Mrs. Boyd-Carpenter may or may not have been correct in her reading of *Dracula* as an allegory of sin, but Stoker refused to allow the novel to be pigeonholed, preferring to leave the way open for other readings and other lessons. Indeed, *Dracula* is a very complex novel with a multiplicity of meanings with enormous teaching potential, about which modern critics have not come to consensus. However, that potential was noticed even by a few contemporary critics; one such, W.L. Courtney, reviewed *Dracula* for the *Daily Telegraph* in favorable terms, writing that:
Romance is dying—according to some littérature, who seems to think that perennial forms of human thought are as transitory as fashion. Already the public is getting tired of romance, and is once more asking for the social problems and the deeper analysis into character which were temporarily obscured by the extravagances of the New Woman. It is odd that, under circumstances like these, one of the most curious and striking of recent productions should be a revival of a mediaeval superstition… (Miller 260)

Courtney goes on to compare the work to Ovid, and notes Stoker’s deft use of folklore, subtly giving him credit for similarity to literary forms notable for their didactic potential. It is not so odd after all that Dracula should be noteworthy—curious and striking, in this critic’s words—when it combines carefully worked out realistic elements with fantastic forms and legends into something that was at once a novel of character, which Courtney claimed the reading public craved, and a novel of sensation, which as a popular genre had already passed its prime. In recognizing that Dracula represented a shift away from pure

31 Stoker was extremely concerned with verisimilitude in Dracula, far more so than with any of his other novels. Christopher Frayling’s examination of Stoker’s working papers reveals the level of Stoker’s exactitude: “As McNally and Florescu have pointed out, these dates [of the papers and diaries in the novel] and days correspond with the year 1893. It is quite possible that Stoker was already sorting out the timescale of Dracula in that same year, for we know that he wanted the events to seem ‘exactly contemporary’.” Frayling posits that Stoker’s purpose was to establish credibility: “He was evidently keen to establish an aura of ‘authenticity’ around his story, by getting all the dates and timetables right…” (350).
romance toward “social problems and the deeper analysis into character,” Courtney was already recognizing its potential as a significant transitional work.

In order to explain more fully how Stoker adapted these earlier forms to create a more complex, socially engaged, and far more modern novel, this chapter will examine the late Victorian “discourse of crisis” which provided a context for the work, the multivalent threats represented by the figure of the Count and his impact on his opponents “the Crew of Light,” and the finally enigmatic nature of the Count himself as an iconic figure who can support such a variety of racial, political, and psychological readings. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate that, while Dracula was far from the first vampire story, it may well stand as the first vampire novel in the modern sense, and one that represents a crucial transition between older and more recent literary explorations of the uses of terror.

The “Discourse of Crisis”

For more than a century, critics have offered wildly variant interpretations of Dracula, often with little concern as to Stoker’s likely intentions. Although readings based on gender and sexuality are very tempting and can be valuable, it is the political

32 In “Syphilis, Sexuality, and the Fiction of the Fin de Siecle,” Elaine Showalter writes that “Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) …is often described by feminist critics as a thinly veiled fantasy of contaminating female sexuality, a novel whose central anxiety is ‘the fear of the devouring woman’ (98). She refers to “persistent rumors that various English [sic] writers such as Stevenson himself, Wilde, Bram Stoker, and later James Joyce
thread that seems strongest in *Dracula*. The British Empire had waxed and waned throughout the nineteenth century. *Dracula* was published in the year of Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, when jingoism was at its height, but by then it would have been impossible to be completely sanguine about the security of Empire. British society was churning with the simultaneous needs to grow and to retrench at home, and, as we noted earlier, the explosive growth of scientific advances and technological achievements was disorienting. Society was necessarily transforming itself to cope with all of the rapid changes within and without. Judith Flanders writes that it was this dynamism which led the Victorians, by mid-century, to crave a “still center” in a society that must have felt like a political and social hurricane (5). She writes that “changes—particularly technological changes—meant that the desire for stasis was almost ludicrous in its hopelessness” (5). This tension between hopefulness and anxiety may well have been a defining characteristic of late Victorian thought.

This anxiety is the focus of what Eric Kwan-Wai Yu has called the “discourse of crisis” (146), of which *Dracula* would have been a part. Yu writes that “paradoxically, [the discourse of crisis] did not lead to actual collapse,” citing Nicholas Daly’s statement that “Fears there may well have been of the decline of Englishness within England, as were paying for their own fabulous habits with syphilitic infections, for the English syphilitic insanity was never a beautiful *fleur du mal*” (92).
well as assaults from without, but these fears had the effect of buttressing—not enfeebling—the power of the state” (Yu 146).³³ Despite the bloom of advancing imperialism, home felt at its most vulnerable—to exploitation, to colonization, to attack from within. Patrick Brantlinger calls *Dracula* an example of “imperial Gothic,” a type of apocalyptic fiction that emerged near the end of the century “in which, despite the consciously pro-Empire values of many authors, the feeling emerges that ‘we are those upon whom the ends of the world are come’” (230). The one-man invasion represented by Count Dracula is Stoker’s apocalypse: Dracula strikes at what should have been the still center of life, home and family, preying specifically on young, innocent women—the flower and future of British society. It may be no coincidence that *Dracula* appeared near the height of the popularity of the “invasion novels” which often depicted England being invaded or even conquered by European powers such as Germany (George Chesney’s *The Battle of Dorking*, 1871) or France and Russia (William Le Queux’s *The Great War in England in 1897*, 1894).

According to Brantlinger, “The three principal themes of imperial Gothic are individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world” (230). *Dracula* is distinguished mainly by the first two; what elements there are of adventure and heroism in the novel tend to take the form of reliance on new

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but mundane instruments like typewriters and recording devices—arguably looking forward to a new kind of adventure fiction involving technology and close observation, such as we would also see in the work of Stoker’s contemporary Arthur Conan Doyle.

Brantlinger notes further that “In the romances of Stevenson, Haggard, Kipling, Doyle, Bram Stoker, and John Buchan the supernatural or paranormal, usually symptomatic of individual regression, often manifests itself in imperial settings” (230). Stoker wrote eighteen books, so Brantlinger is not necessarily referring specifically to Dracula, or claiming that Count Dracula’s appearance in London represents individual regression. I do not believe that it does, but rather that Stoker is explicitly saying that travel to far-flung places carries the risk of contamination, which is one of the hazards of empire.

The Anglo-Irish Stoker might well have been ambivalent at best about imperialism: half of his cultural identity is that of a colonizing power, and half that of the colonized and oppressed. Though the novel is nominally pro-British, the hazards of Empire could not have escaped Stoker: fears of contagion, a reversion to “barbarism,” and even possible invasion of the home soil. All these anxieties were wrapped up in figure of the diabolic Count.

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34 Dracula is in many ways an ambivalent novel. As Carol Senf notes, the ending, minus 195 words deleted by we know not whom, is nowhere near as total as Stoker originally envisioned it: “From where we stood it seemed as though the one fierce volcano burst had satisfied the need of nature and that the castle and the structure of the hill had sunk into the void” (267-68). Quoted from Barbara Belford’s biography of Stoker.
The Crew of Light—the term Christopher Craft applied to the team opposing Dracula—was, in Jonathan Harker’s words, “nineteenth century up-to-date with a vengeance” (Stoker 67). Although they use metaphysical means to fight the Count, they are uneasy about it and are far more comfortable with the devices and technology the Victorians adored. Carol Senf writes:

Pitted against these individuals are Lucy in her vampiric state and the three vampire women in Dracula’s castle, Renfield, and, of course, Dracula. Their taste for blood or living flesh and their allegiance with varying forces of nature as well as their unfamiliarity with science and technology identify them as primitive. Furthermore, their failure to live up to the most basic social codes identifies them as Gothic and inscrutable.

(18)

Thus, the Crew of Light are surprised and deeply unsettled when the supernatural Count adapts to modern London life quite easily. Obviously, they do not wish for the Count to have any more tactical advantages; he is one, they are several, and he has already fought them almost to a draw. But it is possible that Stoker meant them also to be viewed as uncomfortable with the idea of someone or something they have classified as primitive transgressing traditional imperial boundaries by embracing the modern. This transgression of the line between the primitive and the modern is yet another of the late nineteenth century British anxieties that the novel seems to address, and the notion of ancient evils erupting in the modern world would become a staple of later horror fiction from the work of H.P. Lovecraft to movies like The Exorcist.
In “Incorporated Bodies,” Nicholas Daly notes the many, often passionate, critical readings of Dracula: “For a novel that enjoys a rather ambivalent relation to the canon, *Dracula* seems to solicit interpretation, and critics have been generous in obliging. Psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, gender studies, and other varieties of critical thought have each taken at least one turn at reading the text” (34). Like “Goblin Market,” *Dracula* is notorious for using the materials of the fantastic to generate a text capable of supporting multivalent interpretations. Although *Dracula* offers a variety of plausible readings in conjunction with the public’s direst dreads, I believe that what I have called national identity and empire are the strongest themes, and that these broad themes can be further teased apart into those that concern the internal security of the state, and those that concern the external. If “Goblin Market” subverted ideas concerning the role and agency of women in Victorian society, *Dracula* subverts the very notion of Britain’s homeland security.

**The Alien as Disease: The Threat to Purity**

Count Dracula was the most threatening presence Stoker could construct within the confines of the setting of domestic realism where much of the novel takes place. The Count’s pathology threatens not only the body, but the soul. He is like a disease which spreads virulently: over water, over land, and even, when he is transformed into a mist, by miasma. The breaching of the skin and violation of the body’s integrity required to transfer the vampirism was dreadful, but the sheer, naked vulnerability suggested by so many attack vectors was even more of a horror. In Mendlesohn’s terms in *Rhetorics of*
Fantasy, he represents a figure of “intrusion fantasy” (115) in which fantastic or supernatural elements invade a familiar and otherwise realistic setting (as opposed to fantasies in which characters from “our” world venture into a supernatural realm—a kind of movement reflected in Jonathan’s original travels to Dracula’s castle).

With intrusion often comes contamination, and that is another fear which Dracula skillfully exploits. When Dracula was written, germ theory had progressed considerably from when Frankenstein was written, but was still in its early stages. As Elizabeth Miller writes of the vampire legend:

Modern anthropologists, most notably Paul Barber (Vampires, Burial, and Death), have proposed that a lack of understanding of the process of decomposition of the human body after death and burial[,] coupled with the conviction that disease was spread by the dead, can account for many of the reports (A Dracula Handbook 17).

Stoker capitalized on the fact that disease was poorly understood, as well as the fact that contagion was so frequently conflated with the dark and mysterious Other. Dracula gained some of its potential terror from contemporary medical doctors’ incomplete comprehension of contagious disease, and from the general public’s even poorer understanding.

Like Shelley, Stoker focused his efforts primarily on powerful unknowns that imperiled the young and innocent, However, where Shelley’s monster is morally ambiguous, Stoker’s monsters are less ambiguously evil, and spread their evil to others. In a particularly cruel twist, the victims themselves become predators, transforming the
innocent and good into evil-doers in an ever-widening and potentially endless cycle. The idea that, unless stopped, the Count might contaminate all of England would have been a powerful suggestion of the vulnerability of the English homeland to contagions of all sorts.

Doctors generally knew that many diseases were caused by contaminations such as polluted water supplies, but politicians, moralists, and many members of the public assigned a moral component to disease (Royle 201). Sickness was “wasteful, cost money, caused pauperism, and bred immorality” (Royle 200)—and the deliberate spread of an infection or condition was an act of utmost evil. So although many physicians believed that quarantine was a waste of time, the general public was terribly anxious to keep out anyone or anything suspect. Psychologist Oksana Yakushko notes that sexual hostility in receiving populations is extremely common, especially in patriarchal societies:

An atmosphere of hostility can shape the cultural discourse on immigration and can have detrimental affects [sic] on those who are the targets of prejudice toward immigrants. Images of immigrants in the popular culture are often negative and inconsistent. Immigrants are likely to be portrayed in very stereotypical ways as, for example, lazy, criminal, and uneducated (Espanshade & Calhoun, 1993; Muller & Espanshade, 1985).… Sexualizing or desexualizing immigrant women is also common (Lemish, 2001). (Yakushko 50)

Nativists might simply be blaming their own frustrations on newcomers, but it is just such a relentless sexual and psychological process of distancing that works to
dehumanize others. The Count, with his indeterminate origins, provided an almost irresistible blank screen on which to project anxieties about all sorts of alien or unfamiliar immigrants.

This determined Othering reflects a fear of anything that couldn’t be easily controlled: Elaine Showalter writes that anxiety about disease, especially syphilis, was intense and rampant, almost hysterical (93). One popular stereotype of 19th-century Britain may still see it as a genteel society characterized by self-possession, discretion, and modesty, but where disease was concerned there was a desperate need for control, because it respected no borders and invaded bodies: “The issues of compulsory vaccination for children, and control of venereal disease in prostitutes, show the other side of the Victorian state” (Royle 202). The predisposition of the nineteenth-century medical and governmental establishments was arguably more racist than sexist, conflating foreigners with disease, but there was some degree of intersectionality. In effect, both women and foreigners were regarded as Other, in a patriarchic (or rather, kyriarchic35) society.

Count Dracula was a foreign man slipping into Britain and infecting women with the most malevolent disease that Stoker could imagine. It wasted not only the body, but the soul, and infected victims became just as foreign, just as alien, as the one from whom they contracted the disease. The new sensuality and hardness that Lucy contracted before

35 “Kyriarchy” is a neologism coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as an elaboration on the concept of patriarchy, to reflect that within a complex system of intersecting oppression, any person may be both oppressor and victim.
her death, and that Mina eventually would also suffer from, were as symptomatic of vampirism as their lily-white skin, but they were also characteristic of women becoming “foreign”—less British. The extreme dismay of their men was in part because the disease struck at the core of national identity. The stronger the women become, the less like traditional “girls,” the more confusing it becomes for the men:

Women seem empowered in the novel. Dracula himself is outnumbered by the sisterhood of seductive female vampires who are part of his incestuous harem and who arouse feelings both of thrilling sensuality and of horrified disgust in the men they offer to kiss. Dracula’s daughters are sexually aggressive while the men are chaste and passive. (Showalter 99)

During the scene in Dracula’s castle, Jonathan Harker describes the female vampires; two have dark hair and superficially resemble the Count in other ways, which would have been codified as foreign regardless of their origins, while the third has golden hair and blue eyes. Yet all have dark red lips in contrast to with extremely white teeth, and while the emphasis on teeth may be reasonable considering what vampires do, descriptions featuring marked contrast between skin color and teeth are a staple in characterizations of strange, threatening foreigners.

As Jonathan reclines, the fair vampire bends over him, and he describes her in the only terms that he, as a member of a colonizing empire, has for the women of other cultures; he must struggle to place what is happening in the only frame of reference he has. He is only partially successful at resolving what they are and how he feels about it: “There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as
she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the sharp white teeth” (Stoker 69-70). Whether he is sex or food to them (or both) is unclear to him, and whether his unease is because they are unearthly, or animal-like, or un-English, or simply female—or all of the above—is ambiguous.

According to Robert Mighall, “The assumption generally encountered in *Dracula* criticism—that the erotic is somehow more frightening than the supernatural, and that, therefore, vampirism serves to mask or disguise anxiety-provoking images—does not appear to have been shared by Stoker’s contemporaries in the field of sexology” (64). The scene should not be read, as it often is, with the female vampires presented as threatening simply because they are sexpots; although that was certainly a factor, it is far more significant that Stoker was using the almost universally dreadful image of watching outwardly beautiful monsters consume a child before one’s eyes as an aperitif, with one’s own self to follow. The act takes place offstage, but only because Jonathan blacks out at the sheer enormity of the event.

All of these aspects—monstrosity, foreignness, and femininity—were particularly threatening to the British national self-image as stalwart, Anglo, and masculine. And if the threat transcended the physical, then any intercession must be justified: “The physical and moral transformations suffered by the innocent victims of Dracula in the novel suggest the dangers of syphilis, but here women undergo the worst effects, and the men must ‘save’ them by such violent medical interventions as decapitation and phallic stakes through the heart” (Showalter 99). The diseases that aliens—in this case Count Dracula—
were bringing into Britain were so threatening, especially to the British male way of thinking, that even if the cure killed the body, it was better for the body politic..

Showalter quotes a passage depicting Lucy Westenra’s transformation—“’Lucy Westenra, but how changed. The sweetness was turned to wanton cruelty, and the purity to wantonness’”—and goes on to note that “While Dracula, with his peculiar physiognomy and unnatural habits, resembles the syphilitic men who prey on the heroines of feminist novels, the mad infected Lucy, like Sarah Grand’s Edith, turns her aggression first against children” (99). Stoker does not explain why Lucy targets children; it cannot be that be that female vampires do not hunt men—Dracula’s consorts do.

But perhaps Stoker doesn’t need to explain. Lucy’s choice of victim increases the nature of the vampiric threat significantly. Lucy is herself young, but her victims are toddlers. The horror is similar to that which finally drives Jonathan from his senses in Dracula’s castle, when the vampire women are given a stolen baby to consume. In one sense, horror at seeing the involvement of children in something dangerous is an almost universal psychological reflex. In another, eating babies’ blood echoes blood libel, which had persisted in England since the twelfth century; anyone or any thing drinking the blood of children would provoke the most repellant anti-Semitic stereotypes. In the late nineteenth century, the largest immigrant group consisted of Jews, and although general xenophobia was common, anti-Semitism was particularly virulent. As Royle notes:

The Jewish community was, like the Irish, well established in Britain by the eighteenth century and constituted the largest single group of resident aliens from
continental Europe. [...] The initial reaction of the British Jews to the first wave of mass immigration in 1881-2 was to discourage permanent settlement in Britain, but this could not be avoided as successive expulsions and pogroms sent Jewish traders, shopkeepers, and artisans fleeing westward in destitution. In Britain they attempted to revive their old ways, as pedlars and street traders, arousing the resentment of the London costermongers (Royle 74-75).

Showalter attributes Dracula’s “peculiar physiognomy” to the author’s inspiration by the effects of various diseases, especially the devastating results of syphilis. However, other critics have suggested that the Count’s features are intended to be Jewish, reflecting anti-Semitic themes in the novel. When the villain of the text resembles the most demonized immigrant group of the century, it probably is not entirely coincidental. However, Stoker carefully avoids making any direct correlations, and in fact Van Helsing explicitly associates The Count in the text not with any specific ethnic group but rather with Cesare Lombroso’s criminal types: “The Count is a criminal and of criminal type. Nordau and Lombroso would so classify him, and qua criminal he is of imperfectly formed mind” (Stoker 296).

In other words, as Michael Kane writes:

Stoker did not restrict himself to appealing to an anti-Semitic audience by unequivocally stating that Dracula was a Jew, but instead sought to project a considerable variety of fears regarding the state of England and the English themselves onto the figure of the immigrant 'foreigner', 'outsider', 'stranger', 'alien', whose origin is not clearly defined. Although Dracula is
an Eastern European and is described as a Romanian 'boyar' and a 'Hun',
this, to an English audience, sounds vaguely threatening and threatening
precisely because it is vague. (9)

Jews, more than most other populations, were associated by native Britons with
contagion. Anti-Semitic columnists circulated hateful pamphlets pandering to the racist
apprehensions of the Anglo populace:

Foremost among the apprehensions surrounding the immigrant Jewish
community in England was the belief that Jews spread disease and
contamination. …Robert Sherard fomented the image of the new Jewish
immigrants as a “brutalized race” whose bodies were “black with filth and
red with sores” (qtd. in Colin Holmes 38). Joseph Bannister, in like
manner, attributed to the East End Jews of London an extraordinary lack
of hygiene and concomitant foul smell. […] (Cain 139)

A notably xenophobic writer named Robert Sherard, later better remembered as a
friend of Oscar Wilde, characterized these immigrants in the Standard as “filthy, rickety
jetsam of humanity…bearing the stigmata of every physical and moral degeneration”
(qtd. in Holmes 38). Holmes goes on to note that these very undesirables
…were destined for England and the dangers of admitting such
immigrants should not be underestimated. In a clear attempt to send a
frisson of horror through his audience he informed them that ‘a variety of
skin diseases, of curious and abnormal character’ were present among the
intending newcomers, and occasionally the cases were ‘such as to baffle
the diagnoses of the doctors’. Several comments might be made on this….

Sherard did not spell out that his references were to Jews, although in fact they were, and his readers would have recognized them as such. (Holmes 38)

A fellow anti-Semite, John Foster Fraser, lamented in the Yorkshire Post that England had no provisions for preventing the influx of “smallpox, scarlet fever, measles, diphtheria,” with the “unwashed verminous alien” from Eastern Europe and Russia (qtd. in Holmes 38).

Such fears of the alien, whether characterized as “criminal types,” undifferentiated Eastern Europeans, or Jews in general, fed into a basic assumption common to many Britons that Anglo, British people were healthy, and that foreign people were inferior or sick. Racism and anti-Semitism were by no means universal, but were often associated, rationally or irrationally, with wasting diseases. Furthermore, the advances in science (and pseudoscience), combined with the encouragement of the amateur pursuit of scientific study and experimentation, encouraged the sort of thinking that made people seek rational reasons for their intolerance.

These assumptions were putatively supported by anthropological rationalization—some might say wishful thinking—even by some members of the Anthropological Society of London and the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, the founding of which gave men like Robert Knox a forum. Knox’s book, *Races of Man*, advanced the theory of polygenetics, or different origins for different racial groups, with Anglo Europeans superior to other groups (Lorimer 405).
Dracula’s pathology isn’t just physical, though, or strictly limited to that which could be blamed on Jews. The fact that he disrupted the status quo and threatened English society as represented by the Crew of Light was itself a sickness—not only did illness breed immorality (Royle 200), in a reverse twist of logic, immorality was seen to breed illness. Everything about the Count was a pathology of the flesh, the blood, the brain, the mind, and the soul, by the lights of the Victorian era. This becomes an important identifier for Victorian Gothic literature, and in particular that which Brantlinger defines as the “imperial gothic”—an “invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism,” (230). However, while such Anglo-centric readings can be supported by the text, a somewhat different reading emerges when the novel is considered as an Irish, rather than simply an English, work.

The Alien as Invader: The Threat to Hegemony

Most of the scholarship on Dracula deals with the novel as a British text—more specifically, an English one. Some critics go so far as to mistakenly call Stoker an English writer, but, given Stoker’s Irish birth and education, Dracula is arguably at least as much an Irish novel as it is an English one. Stoker had graduated from University College Dublin and worked as an Irish civil servant, and did not move to London until he was past forty. But viewing Dracula as an Irish novel requires a certain amount of revisiting of critical and historical assumptions—including those we have just been discussing. We do not know a lot about Stoker, but we do know that he was Anglo-Irish, and that he was both pro-British empire and pro-Irish Home Rule. This fact complicates
many purely Anglo readings of Dracula. Most obviously, once the novel is repositioned as an Irish novel rather than an English one, the anti-Semitic interpretations somewhat fade into the background—the Count isn’t coded as Jewish, but as a bloodsucking aristocratic Ascendancy landowner.

The extensive critical attention paid to the scene in which Dracula feeds a child to his vampire brides most often leads to an anti-Semitic interpretation recalling blood libel. Yet the scene is just as easily directed at the Irish. Stoker would not be the first to critique the Irish aristocracy by suggesting that they should eat the children of the poor:

…one element…points back to a famous, earlier critique of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy written by a Dublin Protestant. After his narrow escape from the bites of Dracula's women, Harker realizes with horror that Dracula has stolen a child and fed him to his aggressors. Later on, he observes a peasant woman walking round the castle in her distress, looking for her child. Childbiting vampires may not have been a novelty in literature, but Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" surely looms large behind this savage Gothic caricature of an aristocracy literally feeding on the infants of a helpless peasantry. (Ingelbien 1102)

In other words, read in context with fellow Irishman Swift’s Juvenalian satire, published anonymously in 1729, this key scene might be viewed as a subtle criticism of the Protestant Ascendancy landowners. In this light, Dracula is first and foremost an aristocrat—buying up land, parasitically draining his new homeland of its very lifeblood,
enslaving the local populace, plotting to extend his hegemony by creating a new race of vampires—in effect, creating his own empire in a manner that could be construed as a kind of nightmare parody of England’s own imperial practices.

Yet at the same time, in apparent contradiction, Stoker seems to reflect widely held views of the Irish which are far less sympathetic. Significantly, the textual support for either an Anglo or an Irish reading is more or less equal, and Stoker’s biography is more ambiguous than most in offering us clues. To some extent, this is a matter of perspective: as Joseph Valente points out, the “prevailing ‘Irish’ reading” (5) of Dracula is essentially the same as most of the leading Anglo ones, which examine the central blood metaphor of the text and relate it to Victorian anxiety about racial degeneration and fear of the Other—usually Jews. Yet Stoker did take part in real-world defense of Jews: according to Valente, even critic H.L. Malchow, who notably considers anti-Semitic themes in Stoker’s work, admits that Stoker himself wasn’t anti-Jewish:

“Malchow…concedes that Stoker did not think of himself as anti-Jewish, publicly exhibited no anti-Jewish sentiment whatever, and, with his biblical first name and odd surname, was probably taken for Jewish on more than one occasion. […] In 1905, finally, Stoker joined an artists’ protest against the mistreatment of Jews” (Valente 69).

All of this would tend to support Valente’s view that “his monster is no more a piece of anti-Semitism than [it is] a racial attack on his own Anglo-Celtic bloodlines, but is rather a vehicle for destabilizing such racial typologies…” (69). Far from reinforcing the familiar cultural and ethnic stereotypes held by many Victorians, Dracula may very
well subvert them. Taking *Dracula* as an Irish novel, the racial and ethnic groups involved are different, but not entirely inconsistent with earlier Gothic traditions, and particularly with Brantlinger’s “imperial gothic.” But Stoker was Anglo-Irish, and there is a good case for viewing *Dracula* as part of a somewhat different Irish Gothic canon. Alison Milbank writes, “The Gothic tradition with which Stoker was allying himself had two major Irish practitioners: Le Fanu and Charles Maturin . . . their settings reject the exotic Mediterranean in favor of Ireland” (Milbank 13). Milbank suggests that Stoker establishes Ireland as distinct from England and as a Gothic, “even a barbarous” (13) locus, implying he may have maintained an odd dual perspective of seeing both the Irish from the point of view of an Englishman, and England from the point of view of an Irishman.

The threat to the construction of Empire and the perception of “Britishness” could be seen not only in terms of Jewish immigration, but in the very real tensions between Britain and its constituent members, in particular the Irish and Ireland. The seat of the Empire was England, yet the whole was labelled Britain. With the Act of Union in 1800, Ireland ceased to be a:

…distinct if colonized geopolitical entity and assumed the unique and contradictory position of a domestic or “metropolitan” colony, at once a prized if troublesome colonial possession and a despised but active constituent of the greatest metropole on earth, the United Kingdom. From that point in time to the founding of the Free State (1922), the Irish people found themselves at once agents and objects, participant-victims as it
were, of Britain’s far-flung imperial mission—in short, a “metrocolonial people” (Valente 3).

The other member states chafed under British rule, and particularly resented the English tendency to construct them as monstrous. While xenophobia was rife, this fear was not limited to those from distant lands, but rather anyone who was not “English.”

While Jews were viewed as monstrous in part because they were non-Christian, the Irish Catholics were viewed as monstrous due to lack of evolution—barbaric, uncivilized, ill-educated, unclean; and their allegiance to Roman Catholicism rather than the comparatively “enlightened” Protestant Church of Ireland—the church within which Stoker was raised—cast them as misguided mystics in a rational scientific world.

Arguing that Stoker largely adopted this view, Valente describes Dracula in England as a rather direct parody of the Catholic Irish:

1. They live in squalor and spread disease. (Dracula’s intimate relations with both dirt and disease are obvious.)

2. They are reckless overbreeders. (Remember Jonathan Harker’s agonized vision of the “new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to be engendered by Dracula).

3. They are congenitally and pathologically lawless, according to popular assumptions molded by the pseudoscientific findings of contemporary degeneration theory […]

4. [They are] evolutionary primitives […]
5. They are alien subversives whose arrival amounted to an invasion. (Dracula on any conceivable geopolitical reading.) And finally,

6. They just drink too much. (Valente 61)

Valente may be overstating the case, but casting the Irish as a tribe of barbaric mystics was common among Victorians, and is one way of looking at the novel through the eyes of a conflicted Anglo-Irish novelist. It is obvious that religion features heavily in Dracula, and is more than window dressing. Not only does the narrative reflect one of the most basic differences between Catholic and Protestant doctrine, so does the structure of the novel itself. Protestant doctrine held that the age of miracles has passed, while in Catholic doctrine miracles were still a possibility—Dracula’s invasion of London was nothing less than the intrusion of the miraculous where it did not belong and certainly was not wanted.

Further, the structure of the novel is an argument of doctrine: the story is told in the form of documents (or copies of documents), which convey the authoritative word on the subject—a very Catholic idea—but the notion that the documents were produced by lay persons is considerably more Protestant in character. The point is driven home by Jonathan Harker, who declares that the Crew of Light does not require the proof of authoritative documents; faith alone is enough:

We were struck with the fact, that in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document; nothing but a mass of type-writing, except the later notebooks of Mina and Seward and
myself, and Van Helsing's memorandum. We could hardly ask anyone, even did we wish to, to accept these as proofs of so wild a story. Van Helsing summed it all up as he said, with our boy on his knee:—

“We want no proofs. We ask none to believe us!” (Stoker 327).

Protestantism is deeply invested in “The Word.” Family documents, contracts, declarations, and manuscripts carried religious significance in a way distinct from that of Catholicism, which tended to rely more heavily on the pronouncements of the central authority of the Vatican.

Stoker was, as Valente observes, “invoking the well-established literary convention” (6) for lending credibility to a work of fiction by means of discovered documents. However, in the coda of Dracula, Stoker undermines the message by inviting us to question the reliability of Mina’s surviving typescripts of the various documents. Exactly like Christina Rossetti before him, he leaves the entire question of textual reliability arguable, even while earlier asserting their authenticity. Stoker exercises a carefully balanced critique of both Protestant and Catholic doctrine, which is one of the ways Dracula is an extremely nuanced and ambiguous text. The religious aspect is particularly interesting, because there is some biographical evidence that Stoker was a crosser of boundaries by preference as well as by birth, just as his Crew of Light ignored religious differences and cherry-picked from both Catholicism and Protestantism. Alison Milbank argues that Stoker did much the same during his student career at Trinity College:
First, the author achieved the unique honour of holding top positions in both the rival Historical and Philosophical societies, showing already the inclination to unite groups of men that would later characterise his fiction to the extent…of mediating between Catholic and Protestant conceptions of Christianity in *Dracula*. (12)

This might also suggest a certain capacity on Stoker’s part for seeing contradictory viewpoints, a capacity which might well be reflected in his ambivalent attitudes toward the Irish reflected in *Dracula*.

However we choose to approach it, the novel remains an intersectional work of exceptional complexity: religious readings are bound to political ones because religion was a political matter, especially to the Irish. As Raphael Ingelbien notes, “Stoker's own political sympathies, divided as they were between his own Protestant background and his alienation from its more conservative elements, do not allow biography to settle the dispute” (1090). Ingelbien goes on to note:

…the early parts of Harker’s journal are definitely a goldmine for critics who adopt that approach. For one thing, Harker's accounts of Transylvania draw on a source which provides an explicit link with Ireland: Stoker found inspiration in Major E. C. Johnson's *On the Track of the Crescent*, where Transylvanian peasants were repeatedly likened to Irish ones. Harker's insistence on the peasants' superstition and devotional fervor clearly reminds one of a Protestant's attitude towards Irish Catholics-this is a link on which most critics agree. Other elements of the setting can also
point to Ireland, although one should be wary of reading Irish references into every detail that lends itself to this strategy (1093).

Ingelbien is almost certainly correct that a purely Irish-oriented reading of the novel is as potentially myopic as a purely English reading, and Dracula himself is clearly meant to be a multivalent figure who can serve as anyone’s villain, whether he is viewed as a wealthy aristocrat, an alien invader, or a version of an Irish Catholic. As Valente points out, “morally and racially speaking, a man might be both one thing and another. Or [that] he might . . . find himself condemned to be both one thing and another, and to be so in especially palpable and persistent ways” (Valente 116). This is true not only of the Count himself, but of the characters who eventually emerge as his victims and pursuers. To examine this aspect of the novel, we need to turn our attention to Dracula’s British opponents, the Crew of Light.

**The Alien as Us: The Threat to Identity**

Jonathan, Mina, and the rest of the Crew of Light share more with the Count than any of them (probably including the Count) would ever wish to acknowledge. The evidence that Dracula does not need to make Jonathan into a copy of himself—because he already is at least halfway there—begins to mount up from the very beginning of the novel, with Jonathan Harker’s invitation into the Count’s abode:

36 Italics by original author.
‘Welcome to my house. Enter freely and of your own free will!’ He made no motion of stepping to meet me, but stood like a statue, as though his gesture of welcome had fixed him into stone. The instant, however, that I had stepped over the threshold, he moved impulsively forward, and holding out his hand grasped mine with a strength which made me wince, an effect which was not lessened by the fact that it seemed as cold as ice—more like the hand of a dead than a living man. (Stoker 22)

The idea that vampires require an invitation to enter a victim’s home has long been a staple of vampire folklore, but here Stoker plays an interesting reversal on the convention. Nina Auerbach and David Skal have noted that Jonathan “cannot be coerced, but must ‘enter freely’” (Stoker 22), making Jonathan, knowingly or not, complicit in Dracula’s rules.

Jonathan, at this point in the narrative, is a tightly wound law clerk for whom etiquette is all. He has already been invited to Dracula’s holdings, and has traveled there willingly. It would be accurate to say that Jonathan, who is the outsider in this context, may feel that he absolutely does require an invitation to enter a stranger’s home, although this very adherence to his own British standard of etiquette is what places him in danger.

Once Jonathan is inside, other revelations surface, perhaps as slips of the tongue or possibly manifestations of subconscious vampiric influence. It is noteworthy that when Jonathan and Dracula discuss the glowing blue fires in the forest, Jonathan responds to Dracula’s scoff with the line, “I know no more than the dead” (Stoker 27). Stoker is explicitly aligning Jonathan with death rather than life, more closely associating him in
this line of dialogue with his host than with those he has left behind. However unwilling and oblivious he may be, Jonathan seems by his own disposition to be an ideal candidate for colonization.

It is also extraordinarily interesting that it is Jonathan who picks out Carfax Abbey (Stoker 29), located directly adjacent to a location to which Jonathan, through Mina, has ties, and which will become the Crew of Light’s base of operations. Jonathan eventually becomes Jack Seward’s friend, but even at first when Jonathan meets the Count, they are only at three degrees of separation: Jonathan is engaged to Mina, who is the best friend of Lucy, who is courted by Seward. Jonathan doesn’t quite move the Count into property next door to himself, but he has picked out a plum estate next door to a friend of a friend. And while fiction does often turn on coincidence, this one is magnificent in its audacity. It appears that either Dracula or Jonathan wants to maintain the proximity after they both return to England, and one or the other of them is exerting some influence to bring it about, or Jonathan’s sheer bad luck is staggering.

As a narrator, Jonathan’s reliability is questionable. First, it must be noted that Jonathan’s journal is full of gaps and omissions; there are days and times when we know nothing of his activities. The entry dated May 8 is very strange and revealing:

…it amazed me that I had not seen him, since the reflection covered the whole room behind me. In starting I had cut myself slightly, but did not notice it at the moment. Having answered the Count’s salutation, I turned to the glass again to see how I had been mistaken. This time there could be no error, for the man was close to me, and I could see him over my
shoulder. But there was no reflection of him in the mirror! The whole room behind me was displayed, but there was no sign of a man in it, except myself. (Stoker 30)³⁷

The notion that vampires have no reflections may be drawn from folklore, but Stoker’s particular wording here is suggestive: Jonathan is in a room with a vampire, but in the mirror he sees only himself. The shaving-mirror incident may foreshadow later instances of identity confusion in which Jonathan and Count Dracula are involved. On May 31, Jonathan reports that his suit of traveling clothes has been stolen, as well as his overcoat, and there follows a two-week gap in his journal. A little more than three weeks after that, Jonathan sees the Count wearing his clothes and writes that he believes the Count has gone to the nearby village to post his letters—and to plant idea that Jonathan is responsible for the recent disappearance of the village child (Stoker 47). Although the Count has not yet grown young on the blood of victims, and it seems very odd that he could be so easily taken for the much younger Jonathan Harker, the ploy works:

As I sat I heard a sound in the courtyard without—the agonized cry of a woman. I rushed to the window, and throwing it up, peered out between the bars. There indeed was a woman with disheveled hair, holding her hands over her heart as one distressed with running. She was leaning against one corner of the gateway. When she saw my face at the window she threw herself forward, and shouted in a voice laden with menace:

³⁷ Emphasis mine.
‘Monster, give me my child!’ (Stoker 48)

Tenuous as the evidence is, the distressed mother blames Jonathan—or perhaps anyone present at the castle, reasonably enough.

But neither mistaken identity nor misplaced ire is quite enough to explain Jonathan’s intuitive leap with respect to vampiric reproduction. Upon first discovering Dracula lying in his coffin, Jonathan observes the Count’s pallor and red lips; later on he sees that the Count has grown younger and that there is a trickle of blood on his lips. Even with such evidence that the Count is himself a vampire, it is quite a leap to assume that he created the other vampires. While readers may recognize that he did, Jonathan has shown no particular signs of being familiar with vampire lore. But he is quick to jump to apocalyptic conclusions, later expressing the fear that “I was helping to transfer [this being] to London, where, perhaps, for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless” (Stoker 53-54). However Jonathan manages to arrive at this conclusion, it is certainly well-founded, given that Dracula begins to do exactly that as soon as he sets foot on English soil in Whitby. Critics have argued that this is either a narrative lapse by Stoker in failing to establish Jonathan’s prior knowledge, as Auerbach observes, or evidence of unconscious kinship as Valente proposes, and there is evidence for both positions. There are plenty of such lapses in the novel, as well as plenty of evidence for kinship, conscious or unconscious. As much as Jonathan may express his fear that he was “helping to transfer [Dracula] to London,” he does exactly that, working effectively as Dracula’s agent. Time and again, Jonathan writes passages in his journal
that suggest not that he is himself literally a vampire, but that some sort of kinship with Dracula begins to grow from the very start, prior to any transfer of blood, and long before the often-examined mesmeric and blood-borne influence over Mina.

Mina herself is a more obvious case of direct vampiric influence than Jonathan; after all, she has been bitten and has been forced to drink the vampire’s blood. Unlike Lucy, as Valente points out, Mina is never fully colonized, or converted to vampirism (125). So where the horror of Lucy’s transformation comes not only from her own loss of identity, but from her behavior as a vampire in her own right, Mina’s case is a little different. Mina “remains suspended within the dynamics of vampiric transformation, neither incorporated nor disentangled from Dracula” (Valente 125). Further, Valente points out that much like her husband Jonathan, Mina has a “close and unbroken affiliation with vampirism” even before she is bitten. Valente’s explanation traces Mina’s actions from her first motherly gesture of bringing Lucy in from the suicide seat at Whitby and taking care to cover her feet, through every instance where Mina comforts members of the Crew of Light, including Arthur Holmwood’s posture after Lucy’s violent execution, which mirrors a vampiric seduction (Valente 126). Mina’s nurturing nature, like Jonathan’s concern for propriety and etiquette, essentially predisposes her to colonization by Dracula’s incipient empire.

The reader, like the entire Crew of Light, fears for Mina body and soul, but Mina also fears for herself in yet another way which she does not share with the men: before any of them are aware that she has been bitten, she begins having vampire-influenced dreams. When that happens, she asks for a sleeping draught, the better to remain an
effective thinker and party member—but more importantly, she fears that such dreams might make her insane.

It cannot be emphasized strongly enough that it did not do to be a woman thought to be mentally unsound in the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that the men with her love and respect her, and hold her in the highest possible regard, she is at that very moment in an asylum, and it is no stretch to believe that her companions might lovingly confine Mina for her own good, just as they staked Lucy for hers: “If [the] change should come,” upon Mina, Seward writes in his diary as they pursue the Count, “it would be necessary to take steps!” (Stoker 291). The violence of the steps exacted upon Lucy has been the subject of much critical inquiry. (Mina Harker’s indeterminate or uncertain status is also cited [Valente 93] as evidence for Stoker’s critique of the status of the Irish as constituent members of the British empire—wanted, feared, both the colonized and the colonizers.) Like Jonathan’s implicit if unintentional collaboration with the Count and Lucy’s overt victimization, Mina’s liminal state and fears of insanity represent yet a third manner in which the very integrity of personal identity is threatened by the presence of the Count.

**An Elusive Cipher**

*Dracula* is one of the most variously interpretable literary chameleons in Victorian literature, with the Count himself seeming to embody readings ranging from the purely psychological to others that focus on the anxieties of empire, the threat of the
alien, the unusual dual identity of its author as an Anglo-Irishmen, and the complex multivalent relationships between the colonizers and the colonized.

Stoker’s own answers to the implied questions in his books—to the limited extent that he offered any—hardly matter in terms of how readers approach the novel. Although no student of Victorian literature and history would be uninterested in what Stoker “really” thought, it is more likely that, like Shelley and Rossetti, he was more concerned with posing questions than with imposing answers. Biographer Lisa Hopkins wrote that Stoker “is popularly remembered only for one book when he also wrote 17 others. In one sense, however, Stoker did not write 17 other books...there is a sense in which he wrote *Dracula* many times over and called it a variety of different things” (1). Hopkins goes on to ask the crucial question, “If Stoker effectively wrote only one work of fiction, what does it mean?” (3).

One thing is clear: whatever evidence we may glean from historical or biographical sources, the text of the novel itself compels us to derive its meaning from multiple narrators who conspicuously exclude the Count himself. As Ingelbien notes, this is reinforced by the novel's narrative organization. Dracula is famously made up of texts spoken or written by the vampire's victims and/or pursuers; its eponymous central figure is denied an equal measure of narratorial authority, which apparently relegates him beyond the bounds of articulate subjectivity. An elusive, fascinating cipher, Dracula then
becomes a mere body onto which various anxieties can be projected…

(Ingelbien 1090)

This narrative technique of offering various points of view while denying us the point of view of the novel’s central character was almost certainly carefully planned on Stoker’s part, and evidence of his intention to bring a new level of literary sophistication to the comparatively crude materials he had inherited from earlier vampire tales and the novel of sensation. We do know that Stoker aspired to be part of the serious literary tradition—he deprecated sensationalism even as a student. The first time he addressed the Philosophical Society, he spoke on “Sensationalism in Fiction and Society.” Milbank calls this paper “the first of what would be many attempts at literary alliance, a sort of mimetic admiration” (12) for his fellow Irish novelist Sheridan Le Fanu, who had gone to some lengths to distance himself from ‘degrading’ sensationalism and those who wrote it, preferring to be allied instead with the likes of Sir Walter Scott and what he considered legitimate literature in the tragic English tradition. According to Jim Steinmeyer,

When [Stoker] sent a copy of Dracula to [former] Prime Minister Gladstone, he added a note cautioning that ‘The book is necessarily full of horrors and terrors but I trust that these are calculated to ‘cleanse the mind by pity and terror.’ At any rate there is nothing base in the book and though superstition is brought in…I hope it is not irrelevant. (203-204)

As Steinmeyer notes, “The notion of cleansing the mind through ‘pity and fear’ is from Aristotle's Poetics. The implication is that Stoker recognized the value of thrills—
providing a new perspective or morality through the experience. By ‘base’ Stoker refers to the crudities of superstition and folklore” (203-204).

We also know that, while Stoker held strong political beliefs as both an outspoken critic of the British presence in Ireland and a supporter of British involvement elsewhere, he had been a skilled mediator since his school days, and may have sought ways to bridge the gap between these apparently contradictory positions. Most of all, we know he sought to make an impact on his culture. Valente, among a few others, suggests reading *Dracula*:

…by the lights of the “high” literary culture to which Stoker aspired rather than to the codes of the popular fiction to which his work has largely been relegated. [Valente sees] *Dracula* as consciously adopting the kind of sophisticated, post-impressionistic strategies of representation that have signalled, for generations of readers, the aesthetically serious complexity of early modernist artists such as Ford, Conrad, and the young James Joyce and have distinguished them from the practitioners of popular fiction, including Stoker himself. (5-6)

Valente’s argument goes a long way toward establishing within the body of Stoker criticism the idea that Stoker wasn’t just a popular writer, but one with serious literary ambitions. Milbank also supports this conclusion, contributing to a growing opinion that Stoker was, or aspired to be, a serious literary author who sought to transform the materials of the supernatural thriller into a form capable of examining complex issues of
character, nationalism, and identity—essentially inventing the form of the modern literary horror tale as practiced by Stephen King, Peter Straub, Justin Cronin, and many others. Lisa Hopkins, in her literary biography, also lends support to this view:

Nor are Stoker’s books remembered in the ways he probably would have wished. If people have heard of him at all, they have almost certainly done so as a horror writer. Stoker’s interests are, however, far more diverse than this. Throughout his oeuvre, he returns regularly to the idea of settlements and union, both personal—in the form of marriages which so often conclude his narratives—and political (Hopkins 149).

Hopkins specifically identified her biography as a “literary life” rather than a strictly traditional biography. In her introduction, she observes that most previous biographers, including Barbara Belford, draw direct correlations between Stoker’s life and his fiction, but argues that such relationships are neither as simple nor as direct as has sometimes been claimed. Stoker was both a very public figure in his role as manager of the Lyceum, and in his own words “naturally secretive to the world” (Hopkins 4).

However, even Stoker’s most careful biographers and critics, like Hopkins and David Glover, believe that Stoker’s work is rife with so many topical references that it invites a biographical approach, treacherous as that may be given Stoker’s narrative complexity. Yet such an approach does little to explain the novel’s broad appeal more than a century after its publication, and to the vast majority of readers who have little awareness of these topical issues. To understand that appeal, we must look to the novel’s
purely narrative qualities, and to its role as a transformative text between earlier sensational tales, most of them now badly dated, and the far more ambitious novels of later literary horror writers. The nineteenth century saw plenty of vampire tales, and the twentieth has seen a virtual subgenre of them in fiction, film, and television, but there are good reasons why *Dracula* remains popular and is popularly viewed as a source text for the entire field of modern horror fiction. Much, but not all, of that appeal, derives from the enigmatic figure of the Count himself, who has even found his way into breakfast cereals and Sesame Street characters.

Count Dracula may be a supernatural monster who threatens our understanding of the natural order, or an invading alien, or an arrogant aristocratic landowner, but he is also an embodiment of universal fears, a figure on which to focus our own anxieties even generations later. That, very possibly, is part of what Umberto Eco meant when he wrote that novels were machines for generating interpretations. Stoker not only did not eliminate conflicting readings, he pointedly made room for them—*Dracula* is one of the most carefully constructed and delicately balanced Eco mechanisms in British literature. Such novels generate knowledge by virtue of their ambiguity—written, left alone, taken up again after a generation: as long as they can be read, they can be returned to life by readers willing to argue what it all means. This is, as Nobel laureate Toni Morrison has told us, how we store knowledge—but our narratives and their meanings, and the knowledge embedded therein are not static spaces where we file away a single truth about an objective reality. Or, as Muriel Rukeyser wrote in “The Speed of Darkness,” “The universe is made of stories, not of atoms” (135).
What Stoker managed was to write a discursive novel that laid out the identity politics of an age and bequeathed it to history through a chill in the blood. There are many arguments to be made about the degree to which Dracula reflects themes of colonialism, empire, and identity, but there is no doubt that Stoker was aware of the power of fear and fantasy to make works memorable, and of the possibility that a novel of sensation can also be a novel of ideas.
Chapter Five
Conclusion: Adaptable Monsters

Like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it may struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it. The forms taken by any particular fantastic text are determined by a number of forces which intersect and interact in different ways in each particular work. Recognition of these forces involves authors in relation to historical, social, economic, political, and sexual determinants, as well as to a literary tradition of fantasy, and makes it impossible to accept a reading of this kind of literature which places it somehow mysteriously ‘outside’ time altogether.

--Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*

Each era has its particular uses for fantastika, and perhaps its particular tools for reinventing the fantastic, and each of the works discussed here specifically addressed the needs of its era while achieving a profound and universal appeal for later generations. Shelley, Rossetti, and Stoker were almost certainly unaware that they would become precursors of modern genre fiction, especially horror, but all were likely familiar with the various Gothic and folk traditions that informed their major works. In a sense, the very
innocence of these earlier traditions laid the groundwork for their subversive potential. Prior to *Frankenstein*, few would have suggested that the lurid materials of the Gothic novel could be adapted into serious considerations of scientific ethics or educational practice; prior to “Goblin Market,” few would have thought that the materials of fairy stories or children’s poetry by “lady poets” could have been employed in the service of profound explorations of female identity and agency. *Dracula* similarly revealed how the already-familiar vampire motif and the tradition of the sensation novel could be used to interrogate questions of both national and personal identity. While some might argue that fantastika by its very nature is a subversive mode, bringing to light the unseen or the repressed, my argument here has been that its true subversive potential emerges when talented writers consciously adapt the fantastic as a means of examining the crucial social and moral issues of its time.

What these authors achieved was in no way a movement in the sense of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, or, much later, twentieth-century feminist science fiction and fantasy, but they shared certain qualities which, over the course of nearly a century, demonstrated a growing awareness of the uses of fantastika as something more than mere diversion or sensation. Each author, independently and in his or her own era, stimulated the growing dialogue between traditional literary models and the more marginalized literature of the fantastic, a dialogue which arguably continues until this day. Each, in a slightly different way used the fantastic to evoke primal emotions and impart some lesson—though none would say explicitly what they meant to teach, differentiating them radically from the familiar didactic moral fables which had characterized many earlier
uses of. And each found ways to use the powerful image of the fantastic beast or monster as an anchor for fictions which slyly subverted some of the accepted wisdom of the era, thus demonstrating how fantastika may be employed in the service of morally committed and socially relevant fiction. In this they helped plant the seeds of the major modern fantastic genres, providing models for their increasingly complex moral and political concerns and their capacity to confront real-world social issues through fantastic events and beings.

The rationalistic approach to the fantastic developed by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* is clearly echoed in the modern genre of science fiction. As Joanna Russ writes, “Every android, every robot, every sentient computer (whether benevolent or malevolent), every non-biological person . . . is a descendant of that ‘mighty figure’ Shelley dreamed one night in the summer of 1816 and gave to the world two years later” (126-127). The distinguished science fiction writer, and critic Brian W. Aldiss has passionately argued that it is the founding work of that genre, a judgment which has been widely debated but never entirely supplanted. But a rational approach to the fantastic was far from its only legacy. *Frankenstein* became a staple of the English stage even during Mary Shelley’s lifetime, and has likely generated more movies, television, comics, and literary redactions than almost any imaginary monster—or for that matter, any literary work--of the past two centuries, including thoughtful recent literary novels by Michael Bishop and Theodore Roszak and bestselling ones by Dean Koontz among many others, not to mention ubiquitous Hallowe’en costumes and film comedies from Abbott and Costello to Mel Brooks. Frankenstein’s creature has become one of the enduring icons of
worldwide popular culture, not just because of its fearsomeness (many far more fearsome
monsters have followed in its wake), but because of its capacity to serve as a blank slate
on which can be inscribed the anxieties and fears of each era that rediscovers it.

Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” transformed folkloristic material in ways that resonate
with modern fantasy, and while “Goblin Market” is far from the only example of the
Victorian fantastic, her goblins are of a distinctly different stripe from, say, the more
traditional children’s-book goblins of George MacDonald’s The Princess and the Goblin
a decade later. Because of the complex and ambiguous ways Rossetti deals with the
gender issues in her own life and contemporary English society, and because of the way
she pioneered the use of folk and fairytale materials as a means of encoding
psychologically complex adult themes—she anticipates many of the psychosexual
subtleties of contemporary feminist fantasy. Her poem prefigures much later poets such
as Anne Sexton (whose collection Transformations clearly echoes the feminist
revisioning of fairy tale materials pioneered by Rossetti) as well as fiction writers such as
Angela Carter (whose story collection The Bloody Chamber does much the same with
fiction). The noted writer of children’s books and adult fantasies Jane Yolen once, in
personal conversation, mentioned the importance of Rossetti to her own work and
expressed a desire to write a novel based on “Goblin Market,” interpreting the goblins in
much the same manner as this dissertation. In 1987, the influential author and editor Terri
Windling launched a series of what would become eight novels by various writers
reconsidering classic fairy tales from contemporary perspectives, and followed this up
with a series of six original-story anthologies (co-edited by Ellen Datlow) which
extended this process; many of the stories and novels adopt a feminist perspective, subverting traditional materials in a manner not too different from that of Rossetti herself. “Goblin Market” itself has been rediscovered and reinterpreted by succeeding generations of readers and scholars as relevant to their own concerns.

Stoker's Dracula, with its exploration of anxieties of the body and in the tradition of the narrative form of the thriller, resonates with, and some would say almost invents, modern horror fiction. Likely a close second to Frankenstein in terms of film and stage adaptations (not to mention radio, TV, gaming, comics, anime, manga, and even pop nonfiction), Dracula became the progenitor of horror stories ranging from Stephen King’s Salem’s Lot to such loving tributes as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and eventually to a surprisingly resilient multimedia pop culture phenomenon that includes everything from the Twilight teen sensation to more visceral adult series like True Blood, adapted from novels by Charlaine Harris. One might even argue that the currently bestselling subgenre of “urban romance,” in which threatening supernatural figures are brought into familiar contemporary settings (rather than the remote and exotic settings of the older Gothic novels) may well have begun with Dracula.

Shelley, Rossetti, and Stoker are by no means the only ones to provide such antecedents—each of their major works, after all, is a monster story, and the monster tale is quite literally as old as literature. But each also demonstrates how the materials of the fantastic can be used to illuminate the concerns of a changing society—the rise of experimental science, shifting gender roles, crises of faith, nationalism and the fear of cultural as well as bodily contamination. Each work was very much a product of its own
era and its own culture, and each contributes in a different way to our understanding of
the uses of the fantastic in literature—and more important, to understanding the crucial
nature of fantastika in addressing the instabilities and anxieties of the eras in which they
were written. Far from being a literature merely of escape or sensation, or a romantic
retreat into mythology and dreams, fantastic literature can be as fully engaged with the
social, political, and moral conundrums of its era as is the most grimly determined novel
of social realism, and may at times attain an even greater universality because of the
multivalent meanings which its fantastical imagery and ideas can support.

Modern readers still find a powerful resonance in *Frankenstein*, “Goblin Market,”
and *Dracula* because of the ways in which their central figures can echo the concerns of
our own time, as well as that of the Victorians. The possible misuse of education and
science—whether it be in the creation of artificial intelligence or the manipulation of
genes—is as vital a concern today as in Shelley’s time, if not more so. Certainly, the
status of women and the question of control over our own bodies is regrettably no less
controversial today than it was in Rossetti’s time, and much the same might be said of the
fears of the alien and of bodily pollution that underlay the anxieties of Stoker’s *Dracula*,
though today our public concerns may lie more with HIV than with syphilis, more with
terrorists than invaders.

We began this exploration by observing that key transformational texts—those
that interrogate and reform the ways we read and receive fantastic material—are often
associated with historical periods of social and cultural transition. The three texts
considered here, separated by approximate 30-year intervals, began appearing toward the
end of the Gothic period in English literature and ended shortly before not only the birth of Modernism, but at the beginning of the period in which the contemporary genres of the fantastic—science fiction, fantasy, and horror—began to take recognizable forms. In retrospect we can see how each of these works represents a new and different strategy for what H.G. Wells, in his introduction to his collected *Scientific Romances*, described as his narrative goal: to "domesticate the impossible hypothesis" (viii) in order to make plausible that which seems fantastic. Shelley’s strategy for domesticating the fantastic was quite similar to Wells’s own—she appealed to the science of her day, avoiding any supernatural implications—while both Rossetti and Stoker made use of folk beliefs which, to their contemporary readers, had not quite achieved the status of “impossible”; goblins and vampires were seen as liminally fantastic at best.

Equally important, each author made use of narrative materials widely associated with lurid or sensational Gothic and post-Gothic fiction. *Frankenstein*, “Goblin Market,” and *Dracula* all achieve their principal emotional impact through the evocation of pity and terror, and there is such a density of gripping emotional action in each of these works—situations of tension and jeopardy where characters that one cares about or identifies with have been placed in mortal danger—that each work retains its compelling power even for readers who are oblivious to the social and cultural agendas that might lay behind them. In other words, they are all simply good stories, and as such may readily translate into the reader’s world, with its own concerns. This may be a key to the value of the fantastic as metaphor: the imagery attains a universality not bound to a particular time or culture, even as it may address particulars of that culture. We may no longer quite
believe in reanimated corpses or goblins or vampires, but we certainly still feel the fears and anxieties they represent, and for this reason such fantastic figures, while they may go in and out of fashion, never quite become irrelevant.
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