induced by "wise passiveness" (9, 12). Because, as Stallknecht writes, this passive state resembles the more active imaginative ones in allowing the "depths of consciousness to manifest themselves" (12), I think we can equate "wise passiveness" with experiences ruled by the sublime consciousness of "intense unity." Wordsworth unfolds just such a sublime experience in the poet's wisely passive vision of the daffodils in "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud."

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Shelley’s FRANKENSTEIN

In both the 1818 and 1831 introductions to Frankenstein, Mary Shelley describes how her story began as an "amusement" to pass a rainy summer during which she and her artistic compatriots were often housebound (225, 231). The story revolves around desire and process, and how their interrelationship results in either fulfillment and/or failure to achieve climax (pleasure). During bad weather, Shelley escapes ennui by fantasizing her characters’ stormy endeavors to achieve (however nightmarishly) their dreams. Using Composition theory, Queer theory, and Freudian dream analysis, I suggest that with her characters’ conscious and subconscious performances, Mary Shelley destabilizes a deterministic concept of self, while determining her role as a writer.

Because the writing activities of Shelley’s characters shape the narrative,
Composition theory’s prime concern with process rather than product provides an appropriate critique. Just as Dr. Frankenstein pieces together ancient knowledge and new scientific discovery and then sutures together disparate body parts, Mary Shelley crafts her novel from various forms: memories, traditional horror stories, and the burgeoning science and philosophy of her time. Also, the (melodramatic) practices of her characters, such as Frankenstein’s tearing to pieces his second monster midprocess, and Walton’s lack of confidence as a writer (“I hardly know whether I shall have the power to detail it” [217]), correspond directly to many writers’ emotional ups and downs. Framed in this context, Frankenstein emerges as a fiction-based metalinguistic account of Shelley’s own sentiments about the act of writing.

Shelley’s strategy—Walton’s letters and manuscript—formulates a narrative triangle of writer (Walton), reader (his sister), and story (Frankenstein’s tale) which replicates and aligns with the novel’s participants: writer (Shelley), reader, and story (Frankenstein). In one excited letter to his sister, Waltonforecasts his sister’s pleasure in reading the manuscript, while also foreseeing his own: “This manuscript will doubtless afford you the greatest pleasure: but to me, [. . .] with what interest and sympathy shall I read it in some future day!” (23). This doubling effect propels the characters and the readers of Frankenstein to willingly engage in what Shelley acknowledges as her “hideous progeny” (230). With the epistolary novel, Shelley develops a reader who is simultaneously internal and external to the narrative: this ultimately insures reader involvement.

The author or “composer of monsters” wrestles with the accountability of invention. For Shelley, a creator may fear the birth of invention, or its aftermath, and her characters’ repercussions signify Shelley’s own problematized sentiments toward creation. In describing her initial inspiration, Shelley underscores this artistic dilemma:

I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together [. . .]. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handiwork, horror-stricken. He would hope [. . .] the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade [. . .] would subside into dead matter. (229)

Metaphorically, the author refers as much to her own venturesome artistic talents as she does to Victor’s shocking creative powers. Only through the intervention of Walton and his composition do they galvanize for their audience their process and product.

Frankenstein invites various definitions of the charged and slippery term
“queer.” First, the relationship between Victor and Walton, although not explicitly homosexual, does leave little doubt about Walton’s fantasies: “[H]is full-toned voice swells in my ears; his lustrous eyes dwell on me with all their melancholy sweetness; I see his thin hand raised in animation, while the linements of his face are irradiated by the soul within” (23). (Remember that Walton’s effusive admiration occurs on a boat full of sailors, between two passionately minded men alone in a cabin sharing their innermost yearnings.) Second, Victor’s biography abounds in non-normative sexual relationships: his parents’ intergenerational marriage, his cousin/sister/wife kinship to Elizabeth, and his charged homosocial rapport with Clerval. Third, Victor’s search of strange knowledge, such as that of Agrippa, Magnus, and Paracelsus, marginalizes his authority. And fourth, Victor exaggerates his conflict between knowledge and desire: At school, the “repulsive” M. Krempe does not “prepossess [him] in favour of his pursuits” (40), whereas his more attractive professor, M. Waldman, “was short, but remarkably erect; and his voice the sweetest [he] had ever heard” (41). In her first fifty or so pages, Mary Shelley frames “queer” desire as a means to pleasure which her characters never adequately engender.

This “unspeakable” desire becomes an important trope because not only does Victor remain anxiously silent until his life is virtually destroyed, but once the monster achieves speech, he is bashed by “loved ones” to whom he reluctantly attempts coming out. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes about the “unmentionable” sexuality between men, “Of course, its very namelessness, its secrecy, was a form of social control” (94). It likewise controls Victor and the monster because their concealed guilt and longing further inflame their passions. The monster finally resigns himself to his undesirability to humans and blackmails the doctor into producing a female mate, and understandably so, because his previous attempts at directed male companionship had met with violence. At the book’s end, no character achieves climax/pleasure: Walton returns to England unknown, Victor dies despairing, and the monster remains alone. The aspirations of the three main male characters fall short of their original longings, while similarly the narrative builds to finally drift like the monster’s departure, “borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance.”

Dreams in the context of Frankenstein are defined in three ways: (1) subconscious activities during sleep, (2) aspiration, or (3) creative imagining. In her preface of 1831, Shelley writes, “‘I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow.’ [. . .] I began that day [. . .] making only a transcript of the grim terrors of my waking dream” (230). The three definitions of dreaming overlap—her creativity, her sleep images, and her longing—emphasizing again Shelley’s and her characters’ concurrent creative processes. Throughout her book, the dreams of her characters foretell their fates. Freud writes, “One day I discovered to my
great astonishment that the view of dreams which came nearest to the truth was not the medical but the popular one, half-involved though it still was in superstition” (15). Freud’s dream analysis and Shelley’s novel concur. For Freud, dreams are psychic phenomena of wish fulfillment that replace and satisfy the daytime wish, “If only I could have . . .” (38–39). For Victor, the wish seems more viable as “If only I had not . . .” In his dream after bringing the monster to life, he embraces and kisses Elizabeth (his “sister”/ bride to-be), after which she transforms into the worm-eaten corpse of his mother. Immediately, Victor awakes to another horror—his grinning “newborn’s” outstretched hands (52). The content of his dream foreshadows later occurrences in the book, yet can also be read as the latent regret of delivering offspring outside of natural childbirth. Later, the monster recounts his own nightmare: “The horrible scene of the preceding day was for ever acting before my eyes; the females were flying, and the enraged Felix tearing me from his father’s feet” (134). The monster’s dreams highlight maternal absence, and a compulsion for his “father.” These male-male dream themes consistently omit women. During Victor’s nuptial preparations, he intuits his future without female companionship: “[W]hat now appeared certain and tangible happiness, might soon dissipate into an airy dream, and leave no trace but deep and everlasting regret” (190). Elizabeth’s demise follows. Dreams in Frankenstein snarl characters’ desires for what could be with what they wish had never been; the dénouement of their pasts and futures is snagged by internalized fantasy and phobia.

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Poe’s THE RAVEN

Edward Davidson, in his book Poe, A Critical Study, observed that “The Raven” may reflect Edgar Allan Poe’s examination of the possible consequences of “reject[ing] the world of sense and meaning.”1 But most readers of the poem seem content with Thomas Mabbott’s claim that “despite all its elaborate metrical ornamentation,” “The Raven” is “a straightforward narrative” whose subject and source of universal appeal is the loss of “someone

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