

EXTRACURRICULAR KIDS: SHELLEY AND DIFFICULT KNOWLEDGE

EXTRA-CURRICULAR KIDS:
FRANKENSTEIN, MATILDA, AND DIFFICULT KNOWLEDGE

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A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts

McMaster University
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MASTER OF ARTS (2007)
(English)

McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Extra-Curricular Kids: *Frankenstein*, *Matilda*, and
Difficult Knowledge

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NUMBER OF PAGES: iv, 78

Abstract

This project began as an investigation of the way children are depicted, characterized, and represented in adult literature, or in fiction that is not meant for children. In this sort of literature, child characters are typically very complicated. And the ways in which they are complicated say a great deal about the author's assumptions about children and childhood, and about the dominant assumptions of children and childhood that characterize the author's historical period. In order to speak to the ideas which characterize the Romantic period, this project concentrates critical attention on two texts by Mary Shelley, and two of the stranger child-like characters from her historical period.

This thesis works through what it means to understand the knowledge of kids in terms of what I call the "extracurricular." "Extracurricular" signals this thesis' particular concern with questions relating to the remainders of education and knowledge. Deborah Britzman's work on queer pedagogy provided the language necessary for examining the theoretical and political implications of child knowledge in Shelley. Britzman's discussion of what she terms "difficult knowledge" provided critical traction for talking about the types of education Shelley theorizes, more specifically, in *Frankenstein* and *Matilda*, but was not sufficient for a full analysis of the problems that arise in these texts, and within the critical contexts in which the texts are taken up. Instead of simply applying the concept of difficult knowledge to Shelley, this thesis works to translate the Shelleyan concept of "dangerous knowledge" into a model for understanding the relationship of the political to the pedagogical as it pertains to kids. This thesis, in other words, takes place at the intersection of Shelley's discussions of dangerous knowledge and Britzman's discussion of difficult knowledge.

The implications that Shelley's work has for the value of public education, and a less privatized society than the one she witnessed and responded to in her fiction, are still urgent today. While our education system is, of course, profoundly different than the system Shelley was writing about, her demands for a public space (as well as a happy domestic sphere), and a system of public education that is healthy, democratic and keyed towards respecting the knowledge of children represent a politics of hope in which education is taken seriously because it is understood to have a critical place in the formation of subjectivity.

Acknowledgements

Thank-you to the friends whose humour and support kept me going throughout this past year: Alyson, Cory, Jessica, Max, Mary-Ellen, Riley, and Scott. To Johanne and Hannah, who are always there. To Dr. Steven Bruhm, without whose inspiration and support I wouldn't be here. To my patient and rigorous readers, Dr. Susan Searls Giroux and Dr. Julie Park. To my supervisor, Dr. David L. Clark, whose guidance and generosity made this thesis possible. My parents, Marjorie and Terry, whose constant encouragement make any struggle bearable. And finally, to my sister, Sam, the most lovely and difficult child I know.

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Extracurricular Kids: *Frankenstein*, *Matilda*, and Difficult Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

“How dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier the man is who believes his native town to be that world than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.” Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818)

Knowledge, for Mary Shelley, is a tricky substance. As Victor Frankenstein, the eponymous character of her first novel, laments, the “acquirement of knowledge” is a “dangerous process.” While Frankenstein speaks of the “acquirement” – the *process* by which we *come to know*, as opposed to the *product* – *what we know*, such a distinction relies on the false notion that knowledge can ever be finished or finalized. We often speak of “possessing” a knowledge of something; however, even knowledge we believe to possess is always an unfinished version subject to modification and revision. Given then that knowledge exists within a constant state of flux, there can never be knowledge that *is* fully acquired. Thus, Victor Frankenstein’s sense that the “acquirement of knowledge” is dangerous is analogous to the notion that knowledge itself is dangerous. While this statement comes from the misguided protagonist of the novel, Shelley’s work in many ways endorses such a statement. Indeed, the tragic endings of both *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* – the two texts that form the central problematic of my thesis – are the result

of a character's unnatural knowledge. Both Frankenstein's creature and Matilda struggle to attain knowledge of something that has been hidden from them, and both are destroyed by danger this knowledge represents. Knowledge, in these texts, has the power to render lives so unlivable that the characters eventually choose death. In other words, Shelley's first two novels, *Frankenstein* and *Matilda*, are meditations on the danger and difficulty of knowledge. These meditations, as the extensive work done on the parallels between Shelley's life and her work tells us, bear a conspicuous resemblance to Shelley's own struggle with knowledge. Shelley, who was forced to learn a number of difficult academic and familial lessons, knew firsthand the danger of knowledge. Educated by her father for a position he would later deny to her and losing her mother and three of her four children, it is not surprising that Shelley is the author of two texts profoundly fraught with scenes of pedagogical struggle and failure.

Matilda, which narrates the intense and complicated relationship between Shelley and her father through the form of an incest narrative, not only illustrates the danger of knowledge, but also embodies dangerous knowledge. Censored first by her father who feared that the implications of incest in the novel would serve to defame him, the novel was not published until 1953 when Elizabeth Nitchie struggled to bring it into print. *Matilda* was dangerous for Shelley's father, William Godwin, because it called into question the nature of his affection for his daughter and risked the destruction of his own reputation. *Matilda*, however, remains an example of dangerous knowledge – a

knowledge I will also call “difficult.” *Frankenstein* also tells the story of a parent and a child who share knowledge so dangerous that, after a long struggle to destroy each other, they eventually choose their own deaths. What is the distinction between dangerous knowledge and difficult knowledge? Dangerous knowledge, a term I draw from the work of Shelley, describes knowledge that contains within it the power to destroy. While I draw the concept of dangerous knowledge from Shelley’s texts, it has a counterpart in the work of educational critic and psychoanalytic theorist Deborah Britzman. Britzman, who works on the problem of “how conceptualizations of teachers, students, and the excess knowledge between them are lived as dilemmas,” has coined the term “difficult knowledge” to describe these dilemmas (*Lost* 19). Britzman defines difficult knowledge as “both representations of social traumas in curriculum and the individual’s encounters with them in pedagogy” (755). All knowledge comes to us by some form of pedagogy, either curricular or extra-curricular. If difficult knowledge is produced by an encounter of trauma (both social and personal) within a pedagogical framework, then dangerous knowledge is a form of difficult knowledge that has been rendered destructive by a failed pedagogical encounter with representations of trauma. Pedagogical encounters with difficult knowledge can fail for any number of reasons; however, the three examples Shelley’s work suggests are the unwillingness of the pedagogue to engage in a discussion of the knowledge, the student’s obsession with mastering a knowledge that is not available to be known, or the intolerance of society at large to allow such an encounter to

take place. In examining the scenes of education and pedagogical encounters within *Frankenstein* and *Matilda*, this thesis will examine the ways in which failed attempts to deal with difficult knowledge create knowledge that is both destructive and dangerous.

While each educational encounter in *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* is uniquely dysfunctional, there is a common factor (namely the translation of troubled familial bonds into failed pedagogical relationships) that binds them together. Even in situations where education is not administered by the parent, Shelley demonstrates how the idiosyncrasies of parents and the tensions that naturally exist between parents and children are somehow to blame for the failure. Britzman, collaborating with Alice Pitt, further explains that “difficult knowledge is what one makes from the ruins of one’s lovely knowledge” (“Speculations” 766) and “from the ruins of erotic ties” (“Speculations” 767). Lovely knowledge describes the knowledge in which we have an affective investment – the knowledge that forms our sense of self and the knowledge that we depend on to provide the organizing principles through which we interpret the world. Ideally, lovely knowledge is the stuff that families are made of – however, Shelley’s texts demonstrate how easily the love that family members have for each other can be transformed by conditions of vexed intimacy and the challenge of unintelligible modalities of desire into difficult knowledge. In *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* the pedagogical failures that occur between parents and children not only create difficult knowledge by bringing lovely knowledge to ruin, they also create dangerous knowledge

by rendering difficult knowledge incomprehensible and intolerable. As Shelley demonstrates, when the ruin of lovely knowledge encroaches on taboo “erotic ties,” the knowledge that is produced not merely difficult, it is dangerous.

Difficult knowledge is the knowledge of that which makes living barely bearable: the mystery of one’s origin, the inevitability of death, the horrors of society, human penchant for intolerance and cruelty, and the terrible dearth of knowledge about the medical complications associated with childbirth. Shelley was well acquainted with difficult knowledge: her birth resulted in the death of her mother, three of her four children died in infancy, while Godwin “intermittently made his daughter feel unfit for the world to which he had trained her” by encouraging her intellectual and literary skill and ambitions only to undermine her vocation as an author as she entered the profession (Hill-Miller 10). Shelley, however, did not let difficult knowledge destroy her; quite the opposite, in fact. Shelley used her difficult knowledge to create seven remarkable pieces of fiction. However, while her own difficult knowledge is poured into her texts, her fiction cannot be limited to an account of her life’s traumas. Shelley’s novels are critical experiments and narrative restagings of the concept of difficult knowledge and the process by which it becomes destructive, not merely autobiographical accounts of her own, specific difficult knowledge. There are noticeable parallels between Shelley’s experiences and those of her characters; Like Shelley, Matilda’s mother died giving birth and was eventually educated by her father. However, the similarities between Shelley and

Matilda's life are not as crucial as the fundamental departure: Shelley's difficult knowledge is productive, Matilda's does nothing but destroy. *Frankenstein* also stitches trauma from Shelley's life into the fabric of the text. Because Frankenstein's creature was "conceived" asexually in a laboratory, he too is without a mother. Also, the young victims of this gothic horror story are all practically children – one bearing the name of Shelley's own infant, William. While the knowledge that destroys the characters in *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* closely resembles Shelley's difficult knowledge, it becomes dangerous because of a series of pedagogical complications. As Britzman's work suggests, difficult knowledge can never be eradicated, nor should it be repressed or forgotten. It is the responsibility of the parent or teacher to engage children in discussions of their own difficult knowledge and offer guidance and support in order that the child may be able to dwell with the difficulty of their knowledge without being overcome by its magnitude. As Shelley demonstrates, it is also the responsibility of the parent or child to avoid, whenever possible, the passing on of their own difficult knowledge to their children. For Shelley, children's inheritance of their parent's difficult knowledge is the event that renders their own difficult knowledge dangerous. In *Frankenstein* and *Matilda*, difficult knowledge both produces and is produced by the tensions, often the libidinal tensions, that obtain between parents and children. Shelley's work indicates that it is the marriage of this difficult knowledge and fraught familial bonds that are responsible for the production of dangerous knowledge.

Like difficult knowledge, fraught familial bonds are an area of expertise for Shelley. The well-documented details of Shelley's family life could be the plot of a captivating Romantic soap opera. Not only did her mother – a famous and much contested political writer – die giving birth to Shelley, her father, who passionately took over her upbringing and education, lavished her with affection and attention, and then abruptly abandoned her. First, when he married a woman whom Shelley abhorred, Godwin sent her to stay with relations she had never met, and a few years later when she fell in love with Percy Shelley, he practically disowned her. Ignoring her even after her marriage and the birth and death of her children, Godwin only restored contact with his daughter after Percy's death in order that she would support him (Hill-Miller 1-58). Shelley's attitude towards the concept of family and the way her own family experience speaks to her depictions of family life in her novels has become a recent fascination for Shelleyan critics. Hill-Miller identifies the debate between Ann Mellor, who believes that "Mary Shelley was committed to the institution of the bourgeois nuclear family" and Kate Ellis, who argues that "Shelley calls into question the very viability of the nuclear family as the nexus of domestic affections and as an instrument for human socialization" (13). I fall somewhere in the middle of this debate. I interpret *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* as expressions of deep ambivalence towards the institution of the family, and posit that this ambivalence stems from the problems and conflicts that arise when the family home doubles as the classroom. Laura Claridge explains convincingly that *Frankenstein*

“demonstrates the failure of human beings to parent their offspring in such a way that they will be able to take part in society rather than retreat into themselves” (14).

Similarly, Barbara Johnson argues that the novel is, among other things, a study of the impossibility of finding an adequate model for what a parent should be” (3). While I align for the most part with Claridge and Johnson, my thesis will modify their argument to state that it is not good parenting that is impossible, but rather that it is impossible for a child to be properly educated solely by the parent. While the parent-child relationship is naturally a pedagogical one, I will insist that, as *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* demonstrate, this only furthers the need for an external education – for a pedagogical relationship that is not complicated by the “natural” tensions between parents and children. These tensions can be both the taboo libidinal tensions summarized by Freud’s concept of the “family romance,” or simply the tensions that arise from intense parental love and ambition, and the parent’s attempt to control their children in order that they may be happy and successful. In Shelley’s work, familial tensions are vast and varied.

While the dysfunctional family situations in *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* are enough to warp any child, Shelley is particularly concerned with the intersection of informal parental pedagogy and formal (and equally dysfunctional) academic pedagogy. For the creature and *Matilda*, these two types of education exist separately; however, for Shelley, they were one and the same. William Godwin scrupulously trained Shelley in the study of literature, philosophy and politics. Considering that her father, a celebrated political

philosopher, was passionately committed to her education and to ensuring that she was exposed to the great thinkers and writers of the day, Shelley likely received one of the most rigorous educations of any child of the Romantic period. As Katherine Hill-Miller describes, “William Godwin gave his daughter much more than the usual female aspirations and education: he gave his daughter a “masculine” education and taught her, as his intellectual heir, to expect to inherit the prerogatives of literary sonship” (11). In the pedagogical relationship between Shelley and Godwin, Shelley learned much more than a knowledge of literature and languages. Shelley learned to adore her father, to admire him, and to emulate him in her own work. However, she also learned that adolescence changes the relationship between fathers and daughters, that becoming a wife and mother meant giving up “the prerogatives of literary sonship,” and that her adoring father could also be astoundingly cold and cruel (Hill-Miller 38). For Shelley, the blending of the father-daughter relationship and the teacher-student relationship meant that Shelley was given a more thorough education than she likely would have received at school. Parents often have a personal investment in seeing that their children are given the best education possible, both out of devotion and the desire that their children represent them in the way they wish to be represented. However, this blending of parental and academic pedagogy also meant that Godwin, perhaps unwittingly, prepared Shelley for a position he would then deny her. Godwin imparted all the knowledge he could to his child when she was young enough that her sex mattered little to him, but when she

reached the age of womanhood, he refused to recognize her as the intellectual heir that her education merited (Hill-Miller 39).

While Shelley was denied the position of Godwin's successor, she was not prevented from becoming one of the most prolific Romantic novelists and, as I will argue, one of the most important educational theorists of her time. While Shelley did not receive "the prerogatives of literary sonship," she did receive from both of her parents a legacy of theorizing education. Mary Wollstonecraft published two unprecedented treatises on education: *Some Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and *A Vindication on the Rights of Women*, and Godwin, who eventually supported himself by writing educational children's books, published numerous opinion pieces on education in papers and journals (Smith 2007). While Shelley wrote no treatises on education that would establish where she stood in relation to the educational theories of her parents, the critical attention she pays to education in her texts demonstrates that she certainly took a position on the question of how children should be educated. The question of childhood education was among the most pressing subjects for the Romantic thinkers. Between the extensive discussion of child education started by pre-Romantic philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Britain's passing of the Education Act of 1870, the Romantics devoted a great deal of intellectual energy to determining not only how children should be educated, but also what was meant by the term (Spartacus 2007). The nature of childhood and the child's capacity for knowledge occupied the minds of the century's greatest thinkers (Ferguson 223). What came of that efflorescence of

speculation into the theories and practices of education is still very much with us today. As Ferguson argues, present assumptions about children have a long legacy that stems from the pre-Romantic intensification of child-centered writing on education:

[T]he explosion of an interest in the education of children in the work of Locke, Rousseau, and Kant is essential to the liberal tradition that they initiate, in that children become the representatives of the inevitable limitation of the reach of doctrine, of belief, of being able to say what you mean and mean what you say in every moment. (Ferguson 223)

What Ferguson is saying here is that the (pre)Romantic interest in the education of children comes from the adult's preoccupation with the questions and desires that are central to the difficult knowledge of being a "grown up." As is often the case, we are interested in children because of what they can do for us – the ways in which they represent something we once were, and their potential for becoming what we want to be. Shelley was acutely aware of the ways in which parents use children as repositories of their own difficult knowledge, and the danger this poses for both. As *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* demonstrate, an education that takes the form of the unconscious and uncritical passing of difficult knowledge from parent to child is an education destined to come to a disastrous end.

The role of education in both Shelley's life and work has become a recent focus of Shelleyan criticism, particularly in terms of the ways in which her texts speak to the work of her parents, Wollstonecraft and Godwin. Katherine Hill-Miller's book, *My Hideous Progeny*, "examines a slice of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's life and work.

Specifically, it analyses the “psychological and literary influence of William Godwin, Mary Shelley’s father, on Shelley’s choice of profession and her subsequent literary career” (Hill-Miller 9). Helen Buss, D.L. Macdonald, and Anne McWhir have performed similar studies of Shelley’s relationship to her mother’s work. While Mary Wollstonecraft could only educate her daughter posthumously through her writing, her influence on Shelley was unmistakable. Charles Robinson, whose work traces the way in which *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* influences *Frankenstein*, argues that there “is a book begging to be written on mother and daughter, and a study of the ways in which Mary Wollstonecraft and her literary texts play out in the lights and shadows of Mary Shelley’s life and works” (128). Robinson, continues to argue that

Mary Shelley could not have failed to notice that her mother’s overtly didactic and argumentative *Vindication* (which advocated a national and free education for ‘all classes’ and ‘both sexes’ addressed the same issues that Mary Shelley herself was addressing in *Frankenstein*, a novel about the dangerous consequences of education and the pursuit of knowledge. Education pursued to an extreme (either too public or too private) was represented as the cause or at least the occasion of moral disaster in both of these works. (Robinson 133)

And indeed, Shelley’s work gives us a number of scenarios in which a public or too private education is responsible for the production of dangerous knowledge. Shelley, like Wollstonecraft, was concerned about the ways in which finished knowledge, incomplete knowledge, and antiquated knowledge could become dangerous for both individuals and society. Finished knowledge, or knowledge that is imparted to children without leaving room for the child’s own interpretation or evaluation of that knowledge, is also a

particular concern of Britzman. Teaching children that a knowledge of something difficult to accept or understand is complete and finalized foreclose the child's emotional and intellectual processing of the knowledge in a way hinders further learning. Incomplete knowledge describes knowledge that children half-know, but either resist or are prevented from translating into to a more complete knowledge. Often a child's will to not-know will prevent them from pursuing a subject to which they are already aware, and their allergy to difficult knowledge will leave them haunted by the subject they avoid. An education based on antiquated knowledge, which for Wollstonecraft is/should be the knowledge of patriarchy and the position held by women in her society and which for Shelley is an education based on old texts that have been outdated by more recent intellectual developments, holds children back from learning the skills and information they need to function capably in the adult society they will eventually join. While Wollstonecraft's political treatise discusses the danger of these types of knowledge on a cultural and gendered level, Shelley's fiction examines how dangerous knowledge works in specific situations; on one level, Shelley's novels can be seen to act as case studies for the theories initially raised by her mother. But as I will continue to argue, they are also more than that, they are crucial interventions stemming from Shelley's own difficult knowledge that address the complicated ways in which knowledge becomes dangerous.

Robinson argues that "the full relationship between mother and daughter awaits other scholars and other discoveries" (128). This thesis is not aimed towards answering

that call as I will, for the most part, view Shelley's work as singular texts that stand on their own as pedagogical commentaries. While the scholars who treat Shelley's texts as though they were reducible to autobiography go as far as to suggest that the blatant similarities between the texts and the author are sub-conscious, cathartic, attempts to narrate Shelley's own difficulties, such a reading denies Shelley's work the critical relevance and urgency it merits. In response to the common tendency of reducing the fiction of women writers to extraneous autobiography, Tilottama Rajan has coined a term that bridges the gap between the personal and the political; this term, "autonarration," describes texts that are "not fiction, since [their] genesis in the real life of a person lends urgency to its attempt to affect change. But it is not autobiography," she writes, "since it puts under erasure the notion that the subject can tell her own story" (Rajan and Wright 14). Rajan's term speaks to the feminist readings of Shelley's texts that understand Shelley's fiction as representations of the "struggle for female authorship" (145). Autonarration is an apt term for my own understanding of Shelley's work; while it is apparent and important that Shelley was inspired by her own difficult education, my focus is specifically on the treatment of difficult and dangerous knowledge in *Frankenstein* and *Matilda*.

My first chapter will examine Shelley's second novel, *Matilda*. This novella, which Shelley finished in 1819, one year after *Frankenstein*, is written in the form of a farewell letter from the eponymous character to her friend, the young poet Woodville.

While this is, in my view, Shelley's richest, most complicated text, the novella has been remarkably underappreciated and understudied in both her lifetime and in the recent flux in Shelleyan criticism. *Matilda* was not published in Shelley's lifetime; in an attempt to bring income to her struggling father, Shelley sent the manuscript to William Godwin to have published, but because of the ostensible subject matter – incest between a father and daughter – he refused, dismissing the text as "disgusting and detestable" (Hill-Miller 127). Shelleyan scholar Elizabeth Nitchie discovered the text and finally managed in 1959 to publish a scholarly edition, nearly a century and a half after it was written. A number of ambivalent responses followed:

Nitchie, for example, dismisses the incest theme as incidental and interprets *Mathilda* as Mary Shelley's attempt to apologize to her husband for her emotional withdrawal after the deaths of their children. More recently, William Veeder has concluded that 'incest in *Mathilda* is simplistic, finally sentimental response to [Mary Shelley's] involved ties to husband and father.' Even so acute a critic as U. C. Knoepfelmacher has found Mary Shelley's use of the incest theme in *Mathilda* "melodramatic" and wonders why the heroine should "feel such inordinate guilt over the death of the incestuous lecher [her father] who can love her only after she has become a fully developed woman. (Hill-Miller 101)

While the extant criticism of *Matilda* varies in tone and focus, it is unified by an internalization of Rajan's argument: that the text "can be fully appreciated only with reference to the author's life" ("Melancholy" 60). Recently, however, Lauren Gillingham has emphasized the need for interpretive work on *Matilda* that does not "collapse the author into her text" (251). The parallels between the life of *Matilda* and the life of Mary

Shelley are impossible to ignore. Shelley, like Matilda, had an “unnatural” bond with her father, Godwin. While in both the text and the author’s life, this bond never became physically incestuous, “recent scholarship has paid increasing attention to what has been termed the father’s “seduction” of his daughter, and to the incestuous patterns of emotion that structure the young girl’s socialization into adult womanhood” (Hill-Miller 11). Both Shelley and Godwin, and Matilda and her father had this intense type of father-daughter bond that governs the way in which the father socializes his daughter, and both fathers dismissed the attentions that eligible men paid to their daughters. While these pedagogical implications are generally ignored by critics, Miller touches on the subject in his explicitly biographical critique of Shelley’s work. Miller insists that “Mary Shelley knows (perhaps from her own experience) that education goes wrong when the mother is missing or when the relation to the child is distorted” (85). Like Shelley, Matilda’s mother dies in childbirth, and both are eventually educated by their fathers. The crucial difference, however, between Shelley and Godwin’s pedagogical relationship, and the relationship between Matilda and her father, is that Godwin educated his daughter throughout her childhood, and abandoned her when she reached adolescence; Matilda’s father abandoned his daughter at birth and returns to complete her education when she turns sixteen. Hill- Miller argues that, like Shelley, “Matilda enters adolescence longing to be a boy and expecting to inherit a son’s prerogatives [but] she is dismayed to find she is instead treated like a daughter” (83). However, while Hill-Miller dwells on the

similarities between the education that Matilda and Shelley's fathers administer, what are even more telling are the ways in which the two pedagogical relationships diverge.

Shelley was given a "masculine" education – the type of education that would be given to a boy in Shelley's position, but that was an anomaly for a girl. She was given the education that Godwin would have given a son and was trained to occupy a position that neither her society, nor her father, would let her inhabit without a struggle. Shelley was educated too well; Matilda, not well enough. In opposition to Shelley's rigorous training, Matilda's was lax and incomplete. When her father took over her education, he treated her not as a son, but as a wife. It is here we see the tensions of the family romance at play. Matilda's father struggled with the difficult knowledge of his wife's death; unable to face the constant reminder of his wife, he abandoned the child whose birth brought about her death. While the oedipal urges that Freud speaks of assumed that children grew up in the same home as their parents, and thus the desire children would develop for their parents would always remain latent, Matilda and her father do not meet until she has reached adolescence, that is, until she is the same age that her mother was when she and Matilda's father were married. Given the resemblance Matilda bears to her mother and that her father has never seen her as a child, it is not really surprising that his immediate affection for her crosses the boundary into desire for her. By the same token, it is understandable that Matilda, who has always been starved for love and attention, specifically, male attention, would fall in love with her effusive father. However, while

the circumstances by which the development of their mutual desire develops is no mystery, the way in which their mutual desire transpires into misery, guilt, and death is more complicated. The turn I find particularly fascinating is that the father returns, ostensibly to take charge of Matilda's education, and that her education bears a striking resemblance to the courtship of her parents. And in addition to this, Matilda's education, prior to meeting her father, has important similarities to the education her mother received as a young girl, before winning the love of Matilda's father. By examining the education of both Matilda and her mother, I will explore the ways in which Matilda and her father's difficult knowledge becomes dangerous, and the implications it suggests for Shelley's idea of an ideal education.

Following the same method I used for *Matilda* of studying the scenes of education, my second chapter, on *Frankenstein*, explores how dangerous knowledge can be produced from a seemingly idyllic pedagogical relationship. In her reading of *Frankenstein*, McWhir recounts Shelley's education – her “creative processes,” and her “intellectual and literary” history – in an attempt to “explain the limitations of the monster's education” (75). By reading *Frankenstein* in such a manner, McWhir performs a familiar critical move amongst Shelleyan critics and limits the interpretation of a complex character to a projection of the author. While this text has long been considered a horror story, a gothic novel, a seminal piece of science fiction, and a feminist piece, little attention has been given to the problems it raises with regard to education. The

introduction to the most recent edition of the text – the Broadview critical edition – is separated into three sections: “The education of Mary Shelley,” “The education of Victor,” and “The education of the monster.” However, while this appears to be a nascent way of approaching the text, it is really only a slight variation on what has been the longstanding method for analyzing Shelley’s texts: namely, identifying the ways in which Shelley’s own extensive reading influenced her writing. As Katherine Hill-Miller, Lisa Vargo, and Charles Robinson have suggested, the text which influenced *Frankenstein* the most is Rousseau’s *Emile*. McWhir suggests that

if the creature is Mary Shelley’s version of herself in relation to Godwin as suggested by Knoepfmacher, of her own stillborn child or dead baby as proposed by Moers, if he is Milton’s Adam, or the dream/nightmare of coteremporary science, he is also Mary Shelley’s comment on Rousseau’s natural man. (“Monster” 78)

She adds that “Safie, the Arab girl who marries Felix De Lacey, is perhaps a corrective revision of Sophie in *Emile*, with whose education Mary Wollstonecraft took issue in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*” (“Monster” 75). Nancy Yousef similarly uses *Frankenstein* as a test case in her extensive work on the valorization of individualistic autonomy within Enlightenment philosophy and the implications presupposing the preeminence the individual’s cognitive power has for education. Yousef agrees with McWhir, arguing that, “there has been a tendency to assume that Shelley selects details from individual philosophical works purely to lend plausibility to the tale” (“Fantastic” 151). However, Yousef not only recognizes the ways in which Shelley was influenced by

Rousseau, she also continues to argue that his work not merely a source “for the creature's narrative but [an] objec[t] of critical revision” that exposes the “implausibility” and imprudence of being educated apart from society. The hovel, or Lockean “dark room,” where the creature is educated makes for a very poor classroom. As Yousef explains in her essay “The Monster in a Dark Room”:

Shelley's appropriations from these seminal works [Locke's *Concerning Human Understanding* and Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*] define the original position from which the creature's incredible education proceeds as one of social privation. His strange isolation both characterizes and exposes the constraints of prior philosophical imaginings of the developing human subject. (Yousef)

Indeed it is social privation that characterizes all of the dysfunctional educations in *Frankenstein* and *Matilda*. The creature, Matilda, Diana (Matilda's mother), and Victor (the creature's “father”) are all educated in isolation, either by a family member or by solitary study of classic texts. In my reading, the dynamic tensions that arise from the blending of familial and pedagogical relationships are what are responsible for the creation of dangerous knowledge and consequently, the tragic deaths of those who both possess and are possessed by such knowledge.

CHAPTER 1
“FATAL EDUCATION: *MATILDA* AND DANGEROUS KNOWLEDGE”

Shall we admit that nothing about sex education is easy and that, if the direction is to make a curriculum that both forgets the difficulty of knowledge and does not incite curiosity, sex education will continue to signify our passion for ignorance.

Deborah Britzman
Lost Subjects, Contested Objects

Matilda, Shelley's second novel, was only rediscovered by Elizabeth Nitchie in 1943, and critics have taken a series of diverse approaches to this complicated and enigmatic text. Due to her father's refusal to put it into print, the text was left unpublished in Shelley's life time – presumably because it is the story of a father's sordid desire for his daughter and the tragedy that the daughter's knowledge of his desire produces. Matilda can never forget the difficulty of knowledge; she is curious to her own detriment and possesses a strong allergy to ignorance. Clearly, Matilda has not received the type of sex education Britzman describes above. And yet Shelley's tragic novella is a text primarily focused on giving an account of an education governed heavily by questions of sex and desire. Matilda's narrative, which is the story of her brief life in epistolary form, not only provides a detailed description of her own disjointed education, but also extends to what she knows of her mother and father's education. Matilda demonstrates a particular preoccupation with education and knowledge. As Laura Gillingham argues, the text contains a “thematic concern with problems of knowledge” (3). Matilda introduces

the characters of her narrative by beginning with the type of education they have received and speaks of her own life as a series of pedagogical encounters. Similarly, Matilda attempts to narrate a complete knowledge of her self through an account of the “lessons” she learned and the knowledge she has gained; and for Matilda, there is little knowledge that cannot be classified as difficult. Recalling that Britzman defines difficult knowledge as the excess knowledge that is produced by pedagogical relationships and the knowledge we make from the ruin of lovely knowledge and erotic ties, it is not surprising that a child who learns, in addition to a number of harsh lessons, that the only love she has ever received is both incestuous and forbidden, is unusually burdened by difficult knowledge. In Britzman’s work, difficult knowledge is often formed from broken pieces of lovely knowledge; as I will demonstrate in my study of *Matilda*, the fragments of knowledge produced by subjecting difficult knowledge to exorbitant amounts of pressure or friction are not only difficult, they also become dangerous. In *Matilda*, dangerous knowledge is produced by the chafing of difficult knowledge against strained familial ties. For Matilda, all familial ties are strained; however, the mutual desire between Matilda and her father complicates their relationship in a manner surpassing even the Oedipus complex that Freud identifies.

Matilda begins her tale by comparing its revelation to “the wood of the Eumenides [where] none but the dying may enter; [stating that] Oedipus is about to die” (151). What are we to make of this queer inversion of the Oedipus myth? It is ambiguous

as to what part of the myth Matilda has in mind. Oedipus unwittingly kills his father and falls in love with his mother; if Matilda simply inverts the gender of the myth, then we can read her positioning of herself as Oedipus to suggest that she has killed her mother and has fallen in love with her father. This works on one level as Matilda's mother dies giving birth to Matilda and Matilda's father becomes the "idol of her imagination"(159) and her "lover " (181). However, Matilda also understands herself as responsible for her father's death; perhaps Matilda ignores the incestuous desire that drives the Oedipus tragedy and thinks only of a child who kills her father – or perhaps Matilda, who has never known her mother, collapses both components of the Oedipus myth into one parent and positions her father as both the object and the victim of forbidden desire. While Matilda's reference to herself as Oedipus foreshadows both her guilt over her father's death and his confession of incestuous desire, it also resonates with theories of self-narration and storytelling. In *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, Adrianna Cavarero echoes Roland Barthes' query: "Does not every tale lead back to Oedipus? Is not storytelling always the search for one's own origin, to tell of one's own troubles with the Law, to enter into a dialectic with emotion and hate?" (14). If there is truth to Barthes' claim, – and I would argue there is – then those with the most cryptic origins, the most conflicted relationship with the Law, and the deepest sensations of emotion and hate are those most in need of telling their story. In other words, those whose stories are comprised of unusually difficult self knowledge have a particularly urgent need to

account for themselves; as is the case with Matilda, those whose very origin is a site of difficult knowledge are predisposed from childhood to search for ways to narrate their existence in order to render it intelligible to both themselves and others. If we tell our stories in order to be recognized by the Other and affirm the singularity of our own incomplete identification, the ungroundedness of our subjectivity, then what are the consequences of an account such as Matilda's that can be neither recognized nor affirmed? Of course, as Butler tells us, we can never completely narrate our own lives, and thus can never render our stories really intelligible. What is really at stake for Matilda is her ability to render her tale at all – her ability to render its unintelligibility known.

Given that much of what we know about ourselves comes from our position within a family – a position we usually occupy from birth – a child who grows up in an emotionally sterile environment without the sort of relationships that teach us how to interact with other humans is likely to struggle once he or she is integrated into a society based on social and emotional bonds. Matilda's mother died at birth and her father runs away without laying eyes on the baby whose life was exchanged for his wife's, thus Matilda was left to grow up in a sort of foster care situation. She was taken to her aunt's estate in Scotland. Her childhood was lonely and lacking in any consistent type of love or affection and her early education was unstructured and unfocused. She was raised by a servant who acted as a tutor and spent much of her time running "wild about [her] park and the neighboring fields" (157). Matilda's education, which was in many ways self-

administered with the servant acting as a guide, bears a striking resemblance the type of education Rousseau believed to be ideal; however, if Rousseau's *Emile* is the account of an utopian education, then Shelley demonstrates how the type of education he petitions for also works as a educational dystopia. Matilda's servant is the only one who shows her anything close to affection, and much of the education she provides is how not to behave as a child in the presence of her cold, intolerant aunt:

[my aunt] never caressed me, and seemed all the time I stayed in the room to fear that I should annoy her by some childish freak. My good nurse always schooled me with the greatest care before she ventured into the parlor – and the awe my aunt's cold looks and few constrained words inspired was so great that I seldom disgraced her lessons or was betrayed from the exemplary stillness which I was taught to observe during these short visits. (157)

While Matilda's nurse may have been kind to her, her role was to teach Matilda how to behave so as not to risk annoying her aunt by "some childish freak" (151). Indeed, by the time Matilda's nurse leaves her at age seven, Matilda has already learned the difficult lessons of both loneliness and shame. At the age of only seven, Matilda knows how not to behave as a child and how to survive without any affection from anyone. As Kristin Waters has already explored, Wollstonecraft identified the problem of social deprivation in Rousseau's *Emile* in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* before Shelley was even born. And as Charles Robinson adds, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is in many ways a response to Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. However, the critique Shelley provides of an education void of mutual affection and charged familial bonds in *Matilda* has thus far been overlooked by Shelleyan critics. Shelley's novel does not merely rehearse the objections

raised by her mother, but rather speaks directly to *Emile*, staging a scenario in which a girl is educated in much the same fashion as Rousseau's imaginary boy. Wollstonecraft, who like Rousseau called for an education system based on reason, was in many ways in favor of the type of education laid out in *Emile*; however, her primary criticism was that Rousseau called for boys and girls to be educated differently, and that the prototype Rousseau provides for a girl's education was one that would prepare girls to be good wives and pleasing companions for Rousseau's enlightened boys (*Vindication* Chapter IX). And as Shelley demonstrates, a solitary education that omits any form of social pedagogy puts the girl in her novel in a dangerously vulnerable position.

Throughout Matilda's childhood, her only relationships are in the form of strained student-teacher bonds. Her nurse did not satisfy her longing for a parent, her aunt was cold and unfeeling, and as Matilda demonstrates, the minister who took over academic studies did not satisfy what Matilda was looking for in a pedagogue:

I was entirely thrown upon my own resources. The neighbouring minister was engaged to give me lessons in reading, writing, and french, but he was without family and his manners even to me were always perfectly characteristic of the profession in the exercise of whose functions he chiefly shone, that of a schoolmaster (157).

Here Matilda's narration takes an interesting turn; while the minister was not unkind or incompetent at teaching the subjects for which he was responsible, Matilda was still disappointed. The reason she provides for her dissatisfaction – that he “was without family” and thus behaved as a schoolmaster, has fascinating implications for how we read

Shelley's text. First of all, what type of manners are we to assume Matilda desired from him? The manners of a father? A friend? A lover? As her account continues we see that Matilda is confused about the boundaries between the manners of fathers, friends, and lovers, so it is likely that Matilda does not know how she wants him to behave, but yet is still aware that something is missing – that she wants a type of compassion, interest, or feeling that is not supplied by her adept "schoolmaster." As we discussed in the introduction, incomplete knowledge – for example, Matilda's incomplete knowledge of how she wants her schoolmaster to behave – often takes on the form of difficult knowledge. Matilda desires something, but does not have the experience to articulate what exactly it is that she desires. Because the relationship that forms between Matilda and the minister is simple and not characterized by feeling or emotion, there is no room for Matilda's difficult knowledge to trouble the pedagogical relationship by translating it into something else, it merely leaves her dissatisfied.

Matilda's reasoning for *why* the minister behaved with the unfavorable manners of a schoolmaster also has crucial implications for how we interpret the text. As Matilda states, the minister "had no family," and thus did not behave with the type of emotion she desired. What can Matilda mean in stating that he had no family? Does she suggest that he is an orphan and has had no parents or siblings? Or rather that he has never married and has no lover or children? It is clear that whatever type of affection Matilda longs for, he has not experienced it and is unable to satisfy her desire. Matilda, who is also

unfamiliar with familial bonds, behaves towards her father (whom she meets when she is sixteen) in a manner unfitting the accepted notion of this filial relationship. However, Matilda does not suggest that the minister behaves inappropriately because he is without family; to the contrary, he behaves exactly as his role requires. Matilda rather implies that his unfamiliarity with familial bonds causes him to adopt the manners fitting to his career, not the manners fitting to his role in a family situation. Presumably, Matilda – who has never known the love of parents – desires her schoolmaster to behave in a fatherly manner; however, Matilda's account provides evidence to the contrary.

As we see in what Matilda tells us of her childhood daydreams and fantasies, her desires do not position her exclusively in the role of a daughter. Eventually finding comfort in her aunt's library, the classic texts she reads comes to form a sort of archive of textbooks for her self-administered education:

As I grew older books in some degree supplied the place of human intercourse: the library of my aunt was very small; Shakespeare, Milton, Pope and Cowper were the strangely assorted poets of her collection [...] I brought Rosalind and Miranda and the lady of Comus to life to be my companions, or on my isle acted over their parts imagining myself to be in their situations (158).

While Matilda does not speak of these texts in terms of what she learns from them, they nonetheless have a pedagogical effect. By imagining herself into the roles of the heroines she names, Matilda internalizes their situations and infuses them with her own desires. The fact that it is Shakespeare's Rosalind and Miranda and Milton's lady of Comus who Matilda imitates is not inconsequential. The situations of all three characters speak in

some way to Matilda's own experience. Rosalind, the heroine of *As You Like It*, dresses as a boy in order to teach a lesson to her lover; Matilda reveals that her "favourite vision was that when [she] grew up [she] would leave [her] aunt, whose coldness lulled [her] conscience, and disguised like a boy [she] would seek [her] father through the world" (159). While it is her father she seeks, not her lover, Matilda acts out the queer fantasy of gender-bending in order to attain the object of her affection. And for Matilda, the boundary between father and lover is one that is consistently blurred. Miranda, who is stranded on an island with her father in *The Tempest*, becomes a sort of fantasy for Matilda who, after being united with her father, disdains the presence of others and wishes to be constantly alone with the man upon whom all her happiness is fixed. Milton's lady of Comus poses a particularly provocative foil for how we are to read *Matilda*. Recalling that "Comus" tells the story of a woman whose virginity is threatened by a lascivious captor whose lust she steadfastly spurns and who is eventually rescued because of her chastity, we must wonder if Matilda steps back into this role when she "spurns her father with her foot" after he confesses his desire (173).

While Matilda's knowledge of romantic adventures occupied much of her adolescent mind, her favorite fantasies involved her father. Indeed, the difficulty of knowing that her father was alive and yet still unavailable her occupied her thoughts to the point of an obsession. As she describes: "The idea of my unhappy, wandering father was the idol of my imagination. I bestowed on him all my affections; there was a

miniature of him that I gazed on continually; I copied his last letter and read it again and again” (159). By withholding both his love and his presence from Matilda, the father becomes like one of the heroes in Shakespeare or Milton. Matilda fixates on her father and creates a number of imaginary scenes in which they are reunited:

my imagination hung upon the scene of recognition; his miniature, which I imaged the moment to my mind a thoughts and a thousand times, perpetually varying the circumstances I bestowed on him all my affections; [...] Sometimes it would be in a desert; in a populous city; at a ball; we should perhaps meet in a vessel; and his first words constantly were, ‘My daughter, I love thee’! (159)

Perhaps we could say that this is where the difficult knowledge of her feelings towards her father begins. Matilda muddles up her desire for a parent with her penchant for adventure and romance, and without the guidance of a teacher or parent, she is unable to discern what exactly she can expect from a reunion with her father. Her education is antiquated, her knowledge incomplete, and her desires, dangerous.

In her discussion of the way knowledge is handled in our current education system, Britzman calls for a move towards a queer pedagogy –a curriculum that “chafes against normalization” – and that forges a space in which teachers and students can safely and openly grapple with both the difficult knowledge that they bring to the relationship and the difficult knowledge that the pedagogical relationship produces. This move to a queer pedagogy specifically provides students and teachers with a way of dealing with difficult self-knowledge and is

meant to pose as a question how it is one decides the desirability and

relevancy of representation itself. It is a movement akin to Lee Edelman's curiosity toward "the way in which identity turns out to be a trope of representation." The problem this chapter engages is whether one looks for one's own image in the other, and hence invests in knowledge as self-reflection and affirmation, or whether, in the process of coming to know, one invests in the rethinking of the self as effect of, and condition for, encountering the other as an equal. (Britzman *Lost* 81)

Matilda's father, as one who invests in knowledge as "self-reflection and affirmation," is forced to face the devastating realization that his own knowledge must always be held up against that of others, specifically, against the afflicted knowledge of his daughter.

Matilda, whose thirst for knowledge and allergy to ignorance is mixed with an intense desire for passionate affection, exposes the danger of rethinking the self in a society where certain types of knowledge – indeed certain types of selves – are rendered unthinkable.

In thinking of queer pedagogy, I wonder if the terms of queerness can exceed and still hold onto its first referent, namely transgression and an economy of affection and practices of desire that, in its hesitations, both speaks and departs from its relational name. And, by holding to this tension, can a queer pedagogy implicate everyone involved to consider the grounds of their own possibility, their own intelligibility, and the work of proliferating their own identifications and critiques that may exceed identity as essence, explanation, causality, or transcendence? The shift, then, of a queer pedagogy is one that becomes curious *about identifications and about how identifications constitute desires.*" ("Queer" 81)

In other words, queer pedagogy begins and must, but cannot, end with transgression – which is to say, the practices which constitute queer occupy a space of tension between identification with that name, queer, and a necessary exceeding of that name, which cannot comprise all of the indeterminate and singular modalities of desire which it names. What is significant about this tension for Britzman, however, is its relation to the

pedagogical: understood in this context, in which what is at stake in the education of love and the love of education, the question of the assumption of identity suggests an implication of the libidinal ties we form to the grounds of our own possibility. Matilda is curious about her identity, but more specifically she is curious about how *to identify* in the face of both her own and father's desires.

The pain the father suffers from the loss of Diana and the difficult nature of his desire for Matilda, however, are not disconnected. There is no question that his attraction to Matilda, who bears a close physical resemblance to his deceased wife, is to some degree based on an attempt to replace her by the closest facsimile possible. Matilda, who seems oblivious to the ways in which she has become a stand-in for her mother, describes the telling events of their first night together on the country estate: "in the evening when I would have retired he asked me to stay and read to him; and first said, 'When I was last here your mother read Dante to me; you shall go on where she left off.' And then in a moment he said, 'No, that must not be; you must not read Dante. Do you choose a book'" (167). The father is conflicted over his desire for Matilda to pick up where her mother left off and his knowledge that such a wish is impossible, that his relationship with his daughter must be something different than the one he has with his wife, and that figuratively speaking, Matilda must be the beginning of a new book. The months that follow this evening are perhaps the most formative of Matilda's education; the happy, affectionate father of her dreams – the one that she first met when he arrived to fetch her – while not decreasing in attention, becomes emotionally withdrawn:

We spent two months together in this house. My father spent the greater part of his time with me; he accompanied me in my walks, listened to my music, and leant over me as I read or painted. When he conversed with me his manner was cold and constrained; his eyes only seemed to speak, and as he turned their black, full lustre towards me they expressed a living sadness. (168)

This sudden change in her father's affect, while upsetting for Matilda, is also a form of

seductive pedagogy. In withholding a tenderness he had previously lavished upon her, the father teaches Matilda that something has gone wrong that she is responsible for repairing. In an ideal, queer pedagogical relationship, this would be the point in which the student and teacher would be able to share their difficult knowledge and begin working on it together; however, Matilda and her father have anything but an ideal relationship, and this is where their lives begin to unravel.

At first, the education Matilda receives from her father seems to be the type of education she has been longing for her whole childhood – the academic guidance of a passionate tutor combined with the affection and attention of an adoring parent committed to her success. As Matilda describes, “I was led by my father to attend to deeper studies than had before occupied me. My improvement was his delight; he was with me during all my studies and assisted or joined me in every lesson” (163). This pedagogical situation, which mirrors closely Shelley’s own education and undoubtedly the education of many upper-class Romantic children, appears to be ideal. The parent and child have an egalitarian relationship of the kind Wollstonecraft called for and both benefit from the pleasures of teaching and learning: Matilda enjoys acquiring knowledge because her success delights her father and her father enjoys imparting knowledge because he likes to see his daughter “improve” (*Vindication* Chapter IX). However, as Shelley demonstrates, this seemingly idyllic pedagogical relationship is not without its dangers. As long as the knowledge that is shared between Matilda and her father

(between parent and child and teacher and pupil) is of the lovely kind – knowledge that is a pleasure to acquire and poses no particular challenge for either teacher or learner – then the sharing of knowledge happens without risk. When the shared knowledge is difficult, the entwining of the familial relationship and the educational relationship prevents the development of a manageable understanding the knowledge. As is the case with Matilda and her father, the tensions of their relationship render their shared difficult knowledge dangerous.

The difficult knowledge that arises between Matilda and her father does not come out of one of the subjects she studies, though she does interpret her reception of the knowledge as a form of lesson:

I had no idea that misery could arise from love, and this lesson that all at last must learn was taught me in a manner few are obliged to receive it. I lament now, I must ever lament, those few short months of Paradisiacal bliss; I disobeyed no command, I ate no apple, and yet I was ruthlessly driven from it. Alas! my companion did, and I was precipitated in his fall.
(Shelley 162)

The knowledge behind this is the knowledge of her father's incestuous desire for her (and perhaps her own "unnatural" desire for him); the lesson is as she states – that misery can be the product of love. While the specific details of the curriculum are different, Matilda's father learned the same lesson sixteen years before he passed this knowledge on to his daughter. Matilda's birth robbed her father of the woman he adored, and out of his greatest joy came a misery that sent him wandering the world in mourning until

finally deciding to return to his daughter. Strangely, or perhaps conveniently, he reunites with Matilda just after she turns sixteen, or the exact same age her mother was when he married her. Whether the father's timing was intentional, symbolic, or merely coincidental, it proved to be an unfortunate time to take over his daughter's education. It almost seems natural that Matilda, with a limited education on romance and passion and no knowledge of filial relationships, would become immediately smitten with her effusive and loving father; and the illicit desire that the father develops for his daughter, whom he sees not as his child, but as a remarkable young woman bearing a close resemblance to woman he still mourns, is even less surprising. The mutual infatuation of a father and daughter would be complicated in any situation, but Matilda, who is isolated in her relationship with her father, looks to her him for both love and education, and ultimately receives a difficult version of both. If we read this scene for the implications it holds for a theory of education, then clearly Shelley advocates for an education that is not administered solely by the parents. The home, while unavoidably a site of pedagogy, functions poorly as a classroom.

Rajan posits that "the process of Matilda's life-writing is –far from a search for an adequate narrative form within which to represent the singular and original character of her experience –a highly mediated affair" ("Melancholy" 45). Matilda's understanding of her life and her self are mediated primarily by her understanding of her parents and their lives, and since it is "by virtue of its relations to others that [the subject] is opaque to

itself,” the opacity of Matilda’s relationship with her parents significantly increases the difficulty of her own account. (“Account” 22). While Matilda begins “her tale” with her own birth, her narrative immediately moves to a description of her parent’s childhoods and educations:

I was born in England. My father was a man of rank: he had lost his father early, and was educated by a weak mother with all the indulgence she thought due to a nobleman of wealth. He was sent to Eton and afterwards to college; and allowed from childhood the free use of large sums of money; thus enjoying from his earliest youth the independence which a boy with these advantages, always acquires at public school.
(152)

Clearly Matilda believes the details she provides to be relevant to her own life story; perhaps she views her father’s education as an excuse for his inappropriate behavior and indicates that his mother was an inadequate guide in order to explain her father’s misguided pedagogy and prime her readers to forgive him. Wollstonecraft wrote of the damage “weak mothers” can cause to the development of their children. Even though Matilda’s father was educated at public boys schools, the influence of his doting mother taught him not to value his scholastic education and he suffered from the “bad education” he received at home. In this case, a bad education is one in which children are taught to have certain habits and expectations that will prove harmful in their adult lives. The short account of the father’s education demonstrates that an education that takes place outside the home (i.e. public schools) is important, but not enough. Matilda’s father had an easy childhood void of difficult knowledge and thus was unable to even struggle with the

knowledge that misery can arise from love. Difficult knowledge also becomes dangerous when it is faced by an adult who has had no experience with it in childhood. Shelley indicates that it is not the responsibility of parents to protect children from entering into a struggle with difficult knowledge, but rather to awaken children to the existence of difficult knowledge so that it will not come as a crippling shock in adulthood.

Perhaps one of the most notable details of her father's education is the effect that romance novels have over his development. As Matilda explains:

Novels and all the various methods by which youth in civilized life are led to a knowledge of the existence of passions before they really feel them, had produced a strong effect on him who was so peculiarly susceptible of every impression. At eleven years of age Diana was his favorite playmate by he already talked the language of love. (155)

What Matilda is really identifying are the different levels of maturity between her parents and the way in which her father practically took advantage of his naïve childhood friend.

She continues by questioning the agency of her mother in her parent's courtship:

Although she was elder than he by nearly two years the nature of her education made her more childish at least in the knowledge and expression of feeling; she received his warm protestations with innocence and returned them unknowing of what they meant. She had read no novels and associated only with her younger sisters, what could she know of the difference between love and friendship? (155).

The measure of sexual maturity seems to be codified by the distinction between having read novels and having read no novels. Matilda's father has read novels and thus behaves

in a manner advanced for his age. Matilda's mother has read no novels and thus is unable to make an informed decision about entering into a romantic relationship with Matilda's father. Matilda is also seduced by her father and the power he has over her renders his courtship iniquitous; however the problem is not that Matilda cannot speak the "language of love," but rather that she does not *know* she speaks the language of love. Her knowledge is opaque to her and she speaks with an understanding she does not fully possess. In this way, she occupies a similar position as her mother did when she was courted by Matilda's father – and this is only one of a number of parallels between Diana and Matilda's education

Despite her obsession with her father and her seeming indifference towards her mother, Matilda describes the "peculiar" education of Diana, her father's young love, in much greater detail than her father's education:

She had lost her mother when very young, but her father had devoted himself to the care of her education – He had many peculiar ideas which influenced the system he had adopted with regard to her – She was well acquainted with the heroes of Greece and Rome or with those of England who had lived some hundred years ago, while she was nearly ignorant of the passing events of the day. (154)

One wonders what precisely Matilda finds peculiar about this form of avowedly anachronistic education. First of all, whatever is curious about it does not invalidate it. This is conveyed quite clearly through Matilda's assertion that Diana's "knowledge was of a deeper kind and laid on firmer foundations" than Matilda's father's. And in truth

this is what is peculiar for Matilda about the form of education her mother is made to undertake: the student, her mother, becomes the teacher.

The relationship between Matilda's parents is specifically a pedagogical one: the mother acts as the academic tutor for the father and the father teaches her the "language of love." The deeper understanding Diana gleans from her peculiar education fascinates her lover as much or more as Diana's "beauty and sweetness," and ultimately, according to Matilda, her father regarded Diana "as his *guide* [emphasis added]" (154). The investment that Diana's father shows in "the care of her education" therefore prepares her to step into the position of a teacher. In other words, what is peculiar about this pedagogical relationship for Matilda is less that it is an education rooted in anachronism, than the fact that it is one characterized by the sharing of difficult knowledge between the husband and wife: an egalitarian form of relationship that she longs to have with her father and that she tries to produce by becoming his confidante.

What also intrigues Matilda about Diana's education is the resemblance it bears to her own. Both girls lose their mothers and are educated by their adoring fathers. Though it is not until she is sixteen that Matilda's father takes over her education, when he does he does it with "great care" and attention. The parallels between Matilda and her mother's relationship with their respective fathers, however, is surpassed by the parallels between the relationships that both Matilda and her mother had with her father. After a period of blissful companionship, Matilda's father tells her that they are going to move to

the estate “he had inhabited in childhood and near which my mother resided while a girl” (166). This determination surprises Matilda, as this “was the scene of their youthful loves and where they had lived after their marriage.” The only way that Matilda can make this move coherent is by speculating that “while he suffered intense misery he determined to plunge into still more intense, and strove for greater emotion than that which already tore him” (166). The father relocates in order to work through the difficult knowledge of both his desire for his daughter and his grief over the loss of his wife.

Through an account of both her own and her parents education, Matilda tries to

put together a story about herself, to recollect the past, to interweave the events – or, rather, the wishes – *of childhood* with later events, to try to make sense through narrative means of what this life has been and what it might become. (“Account” 32)

While *Matilda* is a thorough account of the wishes and events of Matilda’s childhood and of the misery of her brief adult life, her narrative leaves little room for “what she might become.” As Matilda understands her own account - what she may become is dead. There is no way for both Matilda and her account to exist simultaneously, and she cannot fully exist without the ability to attempt giving her account. I say attempt, because Butler has demonstrated that no one can really give a complete and truthful account of oneself. Regardless of whether a subject’s desire and identity are queer and prohibited or heteronormative and accepted, there are a number of factors upon which the impossibility of a truthful account are contingent. Perhaps the

most pervasive factor, and certainly the most explicit in *Matilda*, is the fictitious ideal of *oneself*: a single self that exists autonomously, independent of other selves.

While *Matilda* demonstrates both the importance and the impossibility of giving an account of difficult knowledge and having that account openly received, we must keep in mind that the novella is essentially a textual account of Matilda's subjectivity.

However, by looking at the fallacious nature of her account and the conditions under which it is given, Butler's claim of the impossibility of giving a *true* account is further illuminated. What motivates Matilda to commit her story to paper? What does it accomplish? To whom is the account really given? As Butler argues, "No account takes place outside the structure of address, even if the addressee remains implicit and unnamed, anonymous and unspecified" ("Account" 26). While Matilda relates her tale "as if [she] wrote for strangers," her account takes the form of a farewell letter to her friend and confidante, Woodville, and is precipitated by her imminent death (151). If Matilda chooses to give her account because, as she claims, she knows she is about to die (as opposed to the reverse: that is, she dies because there is nothing else for her to do after she has given her account), why the desire to give an account at all? For Judith Butler, it is by accounting for ourselves to an Other that we become recognizable to that Other, and only by doing so can we truly affirm our existence ("Account" 26). Matilda begins her narrative by stating that she is "alone –quite alone – in the world" (151).

While it is possible that it is her loneliness that prompts her to invoke the presence of

Woodville through her epistolary address, perhaps it is something else – “a feeling [she] cannot define” that compels her to leave behind a record of her queer and miserable history (151). Perhaps the sordid nature of her account, which had hitherto made it “unfit for utterance,” simultaneously necessitates its utterance. If the desire to give an account for oneself is universal, might it also be possible that some may feel this desire more acutely than others – and that those who do are those who have the strangest, most urgent accounts to give?

Rajan suggests that Matilda “transmits a tale to a reader, but almost posthumously, as if to extinguish the possibility that its reading will change anything, either for her or in the world” (44). As readers of *Matilda*, we can only assume that Matilda dies after finishing her letter – and thus, her text has no effect over her life; however, Rajan – intrigued by the knowledge that Shelley gave the manuscript for *Matilda* to her own father – used this information to argue that the transmission of *Matilda* to Godwin is an account of Shelley’s own passions and desires (“Melancholy” 49). Regardless of whether or not there are direct parallels between and author’s life and their work, all texts are, on one level, an account of the author. While it is interesting to speculate on Shelley’s intentions behind both writing *Matilda* and dedicating and sending it to Godwin, what I find even more crucial are Matilda’s motivations in committing her tale to paper and her reasons for addressing the text to Woodville. I view Matilda’s transmission of her tale to Woodville (or whoever else may read it) as overcoming the

final obstacle standing between herself and death. Matilda, a diligent student throughout her sordid pedagogical experiences, is not willing to leave work unfinished; and the transcription of her history is very much *work*. If her final lesson is the speed at which intense happiness can become intense misery, then the account of that lesson can be read as her final assignment – her last composition. Gillingham describes *Matilda* as “the story of a beleaguered young woman who overcomes her traumatic history through her last act of self-narration” (256). While Matilda’s self-narration and subsequent death hardly overcomes her “traumatic history,” I agree with Gillingham that “the strange state in which [Matilda] operates ... makes her last act of self-narration something other than a simple recuperation” (256).

Matilda’s incorporation of her parents’ childhoods and relationship is simultaneously natural and evocative. Natural, because we too understand our own lives in conjunction with our parents’ lives, and evocative because of the way it illustrates the transference of difficult knowledge from the teacher to the student (or parent to child) and the impossibility of giving an account of the most difficult of knowledge: the knowledge of our origins. As Butler states:

The “I” cannot tell the story of its own emergence, and the conditions of its own possibility, without in some sense bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, prior to one’s own becoming, and so narrating that which one cannot know. (“Account” 26)

Even if we could accurately know the details of our parents’ lives and of our own birth, our account of ourselves would still be skewed by the fact that we were not present or

could not be aware for these moments. And since we cannot accurately know the details of these moments— since this information comes from an Other’s inherently inaccurate account – our interpretation of our own self is also inherently false. For example, Matilda, in explaining her intense affection for ‘inanimate objects,’ states: “the offspring of the deepest love I displayed from my earliest years the greatest sensibility of disposition” (157). Matilda cannot really know if she is the “offspring” of the deepest love, nor can she know if her “sensibility of disposition” is a result of her parent’s relationship; by attributing her own personality to the passion by which she was conceived, her account is necessarily flawed.

Butler addresses a state of identificatory confusion in which the details which comprise one’s account of oneself become muddled with those of another:

If I try to give an account of myself, if I try to make myself recognizable and understandable, then I might begin with a narrative account of my life, but this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or what is not mine alone. And I will, to some degree have to make myself substitutable in order to make my self recognizable.” (Butler, “Account” 26)

Matilda’s account is significantly disoriented by what is not hers, and becomes particularly muddled with what in many ways in an account of her mother.

Even the description of the pastimes and excursions that Matilda and her father enjoyed together mirrors the account she gives of her parents’ courtship. The language she uses to describe her own infatuation with her father directly refers to her description of her parent’s relationship. Matilda states that her parents were so enraptured by each other

that “they seldom admitted a third to their society” (155), and in describing her own “courtship” with her father she states: “I was always happy when near my father. It was a subject of regret to me whenever we were joined by a third person.” Whether Matilda superimposes her own relationship with her father onto her mother’s, or if she uses what she has heard of her parent’s relationship to inform (and deform) her own, she essentially substitutes herself for her mother in order to make herself recognizable – both to herself and to her father.

It is simultaneously imperative and impossible that we are able to communicate to an other our own understanding of our identity, or as Butler puts it, to give an account of ourselves. Imperative, because it is through our communication with an other – communication that requires us to make ourselves recognizable through our accounts – that we exist, and impossible because our accounts always contain information that we can never really know – both about ourselves and others. While we all live with this aporia of self-narration, Butler argues that “no one can live in a *radically* non-narratable world or survive a *radically* non-narratable life” (“Account” 34 – my emphasis). *Matilda* is textual proof of this claim. Matilda’s life is non-narratable on a number of levels; her isolated childhood was spent imagining the exchanges she *might* have with others (namely her father), her brief period of adolescence was ruled by a non-narratable desire between herself and her father, and the last few years of her life were consumed by the melancholia produced by the unspeakable, ungrievable loss of her father/lover. Yet

despite the non-narratability of her world, Matilda ends her life in valiant attempt at narration – producing a coherent story that, aside from the fact that it is a piece of fiction, we know must be false. As Butler suggests

it may be that to hold a person accountable for his or her life in narrative form is to require a falsification of that life in the name of a certain conception of ethics. Indeed, if we require that someone be able to tell in story form the reasons why his or her life has taken the path it has, that is, to be a coherent autobiographer, it may be that we prefer the seamlessness of the story to something we might tentatively call the truth of the person. (“Account” 34)

Matilda is ultimately a fictional account of a fictional character, and thus can only ever aspire to be a seamless story; Matilda has no ‘true self,’ though many claim to find this truth in the relationship between the author and the novella. However, even within Shelley’s fictional text, the discrepancy between Matilda’s narrative account and what we can imagine to be the truth of her person is emblematic of the system by which we must choose between investing in knowledge as “self-reflection and affirmation,” and thus giving a coherent account of ourselves, or in rethinking the self in order that we may encounter “the other as an equal” and thus recognize that our knowledge of ourselves is only ever a fictional story and an inchoate expression of what we believe to be closest to our ‘true self.’

CHAPTER 2

HOVEL EDUCATION: *FRANKENSTEIN* AND EDUCATIONAL FAILURE

[I]n our own time one can find the monstrous everywhere and because of this, its metaphorical qualities threaten to collapse into a terrible literalness where it can feel as if there is no difference between phantasy and reality. How easy it seems to become preoccupied with these scary creatures and see in them what is monstrous in the social.

Deborah Britzman, *Novel Education*

No Shelleyan text has received more critical attention than Shelley's first novel, *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). This text, which is simultaneously a gothic novel, a seminal piece of science fiction, an example of feminist literature, and an autobiographical account of the author, is, as I will argue, primarily a meditation on education and the transmission of knowledge. This story of an eager student of natural philosophy who acquires the dangerous knowledge of the ability to bestow life, and consequently produces a being who takes the life of all he loves, is a tragic staging of the way in which knowledge that is both difficult and dangerous also contains within it the power to destroy. In *Frankenstein*, this power for destruction is unleashed when difficult knowledge is mistreated in education – when the relationship between the student and the teacher is one that further complicates and troubles knowledge in an attempt at mastery, rather than accepting the incomplete and complicated forms in which knowledge often

exists. Difficult knowledge, the term I borrow from Deborah Britzman, includes any type of knowledge that is inarticulable, incomplete, or irreconcilable; for *Frankenstein*, the secrets of natural philosophy are a form of difficult knowledge and his mastery of the subject is the first in a chain of disasters that render the novel a tragedy.

Like *Matilda*, the subject of this thesis' second chapter, *Frankenstein* provides a first person account of the principle character's education; more specifically, in *Frankenstein*, Shelley weaves the first person accounts of two characters' educations as Victor Frankenstein and his creature each take a turn narrating their stories. Victor's story tells of the seemingly idyllic education administered by his attentive and loving father. Victor, who was educated privately in his family home until he reached adolescence, enjoyed all the pleasures of family life and an indulgent education. We see, however, from Victor's transition to college, that his elementary education did not prepare him for the society he was to enter. Victor's education, however, is in stark contrast to the lonely, self-administered education of the creature he creates and then abandons. Like *Matilda*, the creature is without a mother and is abandoned by his father at "birth." Without any form of foster care, the forsaken creature learns about society through covert observations, the study of the few texts he has available to him, and the experiment notes of his father-creator. Like Victor, the creature's introduction to society takes the form of an introduction to intensely difficult knowledge; the creature learns the most difficult lesson of all: that the knowledge he both embodies and possesses has no place in the

society he longs to be a part of. Through a series of close readings of the scenes of education in *Frankenstein*, this chapter will examine the ways in which the sharing of difficult knowledge between parents and children – specifically between fathers and sons – renders difficult knowledge dangerous.

The way in which Shelley's narrative lingers over scenes of education has not been overlooked in Shelleyan criticism. Many have argued that the text is a subversive staging of the type of education that Rousseau lays out in *Emile*. Nancy Yousef has explored the ways in which *Frankenstein* speaks to Mary Wollstonecraft's argument against Rousseau's theory of ideal education. As Yousef explains: "For Shelley, 'the cares required by children,' like the 'helpless state of infancy' invoked by her mother, are evidence that the solitary state is unnatural to human beings, and autonomy an artificial theoretical starting point for human development" (Yousef 155). With Yousef, I argue that, for Shelley, the theoretical *starting point* for human development is a domestic sphere built on the values of unfettered agency, equality, and the cultivation of a deeper human happiness which is antithetical to the sort of alienating and virilizing artificial autonomy theorized by Rousseau. What is missing from the creature's childhood, however, and what Shelley's text argues is essential to the constitution of children educated in the imperative to tarry with difficult knowledge, is a parent or teacher who is able to dwell with and respect the complexity of childhood knowledge.

D. L. MacDonald and Kathleen Scherf also approach *Frankenstein* from the angle

of its educational significance. Their introduction to the *Broadview* critical edition of the text is broken down into three sections: “The Education of Mary Shelley”, “The Education of Victor Frankenstein”, and “The Education of the Monster.” The introduction is an in-depth survey of both the texts that Victor and the creature study in *Frankenstein* and the texts that specifically inform Shelley’s novel. While I agree with the emphasis that MacDonald and Scherf place on importance of education in the text, the way I will approach these scenes of education is very different. Instead of looking at the specific sources of knowledge, (the science of Darwin, the poetry of Milton, the philosophy of Godwin), I will explore how Shelley theorizes the ways in which knowledge is struggled with, imparted and acquired. The texts that both the creature and Victor read are important to the extent that they characterize the types of knowledge that the students find difficult: for Victor, the unfinished knowledge of past natural philosophers that he finds in antiquated science books chafes against his own desire to master both knowledge and the secrets of life; for the creature the cruelty and violence of human society that he gleans from Volney’s *Ruin of Empires* and the responsibility of a creator to its creature as illustrated in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* teach him of the impossibility of his own situation. However, while the particular texts that impart difficult knowledge to Victor and the creature are crucial to the specificity of their situations, what is even more urgent in Shelley’s text are the implications their specific situation hold for a discussion of childhood education. Shelley, like both her parents,

demonstrates an interest in conceiving the ideal method for educating children and addressing the problems she saw in the current system of education – problems she likely had with her own education.

Barbara Johnson argues that *Frankenstein* is ultimately the “elaborate and unsettling formulation of the relation between parenthood and monstrosity” (3). And indeed, *Frankenstein* is a story about a man and the monster he creates – the story of a strange, power-driven father and his oversized, “unnatural” son. But it is also the story that in effect de-naturalizes “fatherhood” and “sonship,” bringing out their culturally constructed nature by literalizing that constructedness in the invention of the creature’s life from lifeless parts. Like Matilda’s father, Victor Frankenstein abandons his child at birth and shirks the duties of his role as father upon their reunion. In many ways Victor behaves monstrosity and, in doing so, creates a monster. Laura Claridge argues that *Frankenstein* “demonstrates the failure of human beings to parent their offspring in such a way that they will be able to take part in society rather than retreat into themselves (Claridge 14). While this may be true in part, Victor’s failure to take part in society is the result of his father’s failure to properly educate him, while the creature is unable to take part in society by virtue of his intolerable, even unintelligible, ontology. He is not a man but a creature, and as the way Frankenstein and the DeLacey family responds to him demonstrates, society reduces creatures – those who are not quite men - to monsters. And while the child-like creature does become the monster in the text, there remains

suspended in the text the question of how responsible the father is for such a transformation.

Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, wrote a great deal about the responsibilities of the parent in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and goes as far as to state that "a great proportion of the misery that wanders, in hideous forms, around the world, is allowed to rise from the negligence of parents" (Wollstonecraft 293). The creature in *Frankenstein* – indeed the miserable and hideous form that wanders the earth – is more a victim of his father's neglect than he is a monster. The creature, when he finally gets to meet his negligent father, passionately explains that "all men hate the wretched; how must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things! Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us" (Shelley 125). The creature, from his observation of the DeLacey family, develops a profound sense of the responsibility and duties of the parent; a sense of responsibility Victor does not share. However, Victor does not recognize the familial bond between himself and his creature in the same way his creation does, and thus spurns the creature as the horrible product of a misguided experiment, not the helpless being he is responsible for creating. Though the creature begins life with a large, adult frame, he mentally and emotionally begins life as a child. The account he gives to Victor describes his first memory as an infantile perception of dark and light and pain and hunger. The creature develops quickly, and though he is abandoned and friendless, has a

natural drive to be kind and gentle. Even after he is treated cruelly by humans, the creature still longs for their acceptance, companionship, and love.

* * * * *

Anne McWhir describes the creature as “an educable child of nature denied perfectibility within a social context and thus doomed to perversity” (76). In many ways the creature is a child of nature: upon first waking to life in Victor’s laboratory, the creature gradually builds perceptions of his surroundings and soon heads out into the world in search of food. After wandering through forests and villages and meeting horror and repulsion in every human he encounters, the creature crawls into a hovel in order to hide from the weather and the violence of society. This hovel, what Yousef refers to as an “empirical crib,” is the classroom in which the majority of the creature’s education takes place. The hovel is also the woodshed of the DeLacey family – the humans who unwittingly provide the creature with his elementary education. As the creature describes:

On examining my dwelling, I found that one of the windows of the cottage had formerly occupied a part of it, but the panes had been filled up with wood. In one of these was a small and almost imperceptible chink, through which the eye could just penetrate. (136)

It is through this “chink” that the creature observes the daily life of the DeLacey’s, a noble family reduced to poverty by the cruel machinations of a man the family had attempted to rescue from unjust imprisonment. Yousef is right to label the hovel an

empiricist crib, as it is from observing the movements and overhearing the conversations of the DeLacey's that the creature acquires all of his knowledge. As the creature narrates:

I learned and applied the words, fire, milk, bread, and wood. I learned also the names of the cottagers themselves. The youth and his companion had each of them several names, but the old man had only one, which was father. The girl was called sister, or Agatha; and the youth Felix, brother, or son. I cannot describe the delight I felt when I learned the ideas appropriated to each of these sounds, and was able to pronounce them. I distinguished several other words, without being able as yet to understand or apply them; such as good, dearest, unhappy. (140)

The creature is a diligent student and learns quickly without any direct instruction; while he learns from the observation of others, he is unknown to them, and thus his education is entirely self-administered. As we will see with Victor, all education is to some extent self-administered, even in the presence of a teacher; however, the role a good teacher can play in a child's education significantly effects the outcome of even the private learning that is secreted away in the mind. Like Rousseau's Emile, only without a tutor or guide, the creature is isolated and directs his own learning in the direction that best serves his desire: to make himself known and acceptable to human society, and more specifically to the DeLacey's. The creature hopes that the "knowledge [of language] might enable [him] to make [the DeLacey's] overlook the deformity of [his] figure; for with this also the contrast perpetually presented to [his] eyes had made [him] acquainted" (141). At this point the creature is still unaware of the difficult knowledge – indeed, the dangerous knowledge – that renders his life unlivable and his actions monstrous: the knowledge that no matter what he learns, regardless what he knows, he will never be accepted into

human society because of the sordid nature of his origin and the physical deformity of his frame. As McWhir argues, “Frankenstein’s creature can be educated as a human being only if society is willing to accept him as such” (76). “Otherwise, he can be educated only to know the full extent of his education, denied social identity by the very society he longs to join” (77). In reflecting on this point in his education, the creature laments: “Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity” (142). Indeed, the “fatal effects” of his “miserable deformity” undoubtedly constitute difficult knowledge, but it is a particularly dangerous form of difficult knowledge because it is knowledge that is not bearable: the creature cannot “live with” the understanding that the reckless experimentation of a man who disavows all connection to his progeny has brought him to life, and that he has been brought to life only to be taught that he has no right to live.

In addition to observing the DeLacy family, the creature has access to a small collection of books that comprise the textbooks for his education. Like Matilda, the creature reads Milton and, through his reading of the work of literary fathers, searches for a replacement of his own absent father. McWhir gives a cogent reading of the way in which the creature’s reading material contributes to his conflicted self knowledge:

Victor Frankenstein’s monster, deformed as much by the texts that teach him as by his “creator,” constructs his own sense of self only to discover that he has no right to exist. Through the books he reads, he discovers, or perhaps constructs, his intellectual parents – only to realize that their lessons have formed him for a world that will not accept him. In a sense he is twice made – first through Frankenstein’s macabre piecing together of fragments from the grave, then

through the textual construction of his own sense of self. His attempt to discover and to make sense of the father is thus both biological and literary. (74)

And certainly the creature's small archive forms and deforms his knowledge of both himself and the world he longs to inhabit. In addition to *Plutarch's Lives* and *The Sorrows of Werter*, which illustrate the human's capacity for love and pain, the creature diligently studies *Paradise Lost* and is simultaneously fascinated and horrified to learn of the responsibility a creator has to his creation. However, despite the creature's fascination with the story of Adam and his attentive creator, the text that affects him more than any other is Volney's *The Ruins of Empire* – the text he overhears Felix DeLacey read to his fiancé Safie. This radical text from which the creature learns his world history does more to turn the creature against humanity than the humans who spurned him and teaches the creature lessons of violence and destruction. The creature states that

for a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow, or even why there were laws and governments; but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased, and I turned away with disgust and loathing. (Shelley 145).

The dismal picture this book paints of humanity did little to inspire a love or respect for human life. Mary Wollstonecraft, Shelly's mother and one of the most important educational philosophers of her time, warned against teaching children about human perversions too early on in their development, arguing that "an early acquaintance with human infirmities; or, what is termed knowledge of the world, is the surest way, in my opinion, to contract the heart and dampen the natural youthful ardour which produces not only great talents, but great virtues" (Wollstonecraft 232). Wollstonecraft is not

concerned here that a child who learns of another's wicked deed will be corrupted by the bad example, but rather that the child who has no natural inclination towards evil will be so troubled by the knowledge that there are those who do have such an inclination, that they will suffer pain and confusion to a degree that will stunt their mental and emotional development. In a way, Wollstonecraft is speaking about difficult knowledge – but a very specific type of difficult knowledge. Wollstonecraft refers to the difficult knowledge “of the world;” Britzman, who speaks of this sort of knowledge in terms of social traumas, is concerned with how we transmit this sort of difficult knowledge in education (756). Britzman, however, does not recommend that we hide this sort of knowledge from children, but rather that we handle discussions of this sort of knowledge in a manner that does not foreclose the child's struggle with knowledge or prevent the child from dwelling with the impossibility and difficulty of knowledge in general. What is dangerous about the way in which the creature learns of the difficult knowledge of the world is the absence of a teacher to guide his struggle with knowledge and the weighty implications the difficult knowledge has for his own life. As McWhir argues:

Educated to reiterate lessons of submission, dependence, and assimilation, the monster in *Frankenstein* replicates the transformation of repression into oppression. In the process he may teach us something not only about the political context of Mary Shelley's novel, but also about our own situation as teachers and students. (McWhir 73)

And certainly the creature does teach us something about “our situation as teachers and students.” We learn from the creature that the pedagogical relationship between students

and teachers is one necessarily fraught with difficult knowledge, and that that relationship is essential to the process of learning by which we make knowledge bearable. In asking difficult questions, even if the teacher cannot answer the question, the child articulates the mysteries and quandaries that plague and puzzle their thoughts. Shelley and Britzman would agree that what is more important than the answer to these questions is an educator willing to engage in the discussion the question poses and dwell with both the child's knowledge and that which remains non-knowledge.

In "The Return of the Question Child," Britzman recalls two questions that the famed child psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein, fielded from her own five-year-old son: "how do eyes stay in?" [and] "how does a person's skin come on him?" (Britzman, "Question" 5). Such strange, even unnerving queries reflect a child's deeply felt desire for knowledge that he or she cannot possess, because, in effect, the child *is* this knowledge, made flesh. While it is hard enough for a parent to fully explain to a child, even a child born of a "natural birth," where they came from, it is even more difficult to explain to a child with a non-normative beginning how they came to be. The mass of advice books and parenting guides that offer ways of telling children about sexual reproduction, adoption, and alternate methods of having children has become quite a lucrative business in our society. But even with all this "professional" advice, reproduction often becomes a troubling fascination for children. More difficult, however, than explaining to a child that he or she is the product of sexual intercourse between two

adults, is explaining to a creature that he is the product of a sordid scientific experiment. When he finally meets his creator/father the creature gives an account of the pain and frustration caused by the mysterious knowledge of his queer birth: “from my earliest remembrance I had been as I then was in height and proportion. I had never yet seen a being resembling me, or who claimed any intercourse with me. What was I? The question again recurred, to be answered only with groans” (146). The creature – a queer question child – grows up without a teacher or parent to field his difficult questions. Not only is the answer to the creature’s question, “What [am] I,” an impossible answer to give, his creator-father is unwilling to engage in such a discussion.

It is simultaneously impossible and imperative that the creature knows who he is. Comprised of a collection of body parts stolen from graves, the creature is truly an example of the living dead – a veritable, disembodied, zombie. Derrida says of the dead that “[o]ne has to know. *One has to know it. One has to have knowledge* [Il faut savoir]. Now, to know is to know who and where, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies – for it must stay in its place. In a safe place” (Derrida 9). Victor is either ignorant of or unconcerned with the knowledge that the dead must stay in one place. Embodied by pieces of the dead that are both dis- and re-located, his very body is an unsafe space – a site and a source of dangerous knowledge. How could the creature not mourn his life and existence upon discovering that he is composed the pieces of dead bodies that already being mourned by others? The creature learns where his skin comes

from and how his eyes stay in from the notes he finds from Victor's experiment. As he explains to his creator the source for this knowledge he states: "It was your journal of the four months that preceded my creation. You minutely described in these papers every step you took in the progress of your work; this history was mingled with accounts of domestic occurrences" (Shelley 155). It is through these papers that the creature is first introduced to his creator; the laboratory notes that record the progress of Victor's disastrous experiment comprise the final project of his ambitious endeavors. The creature, while a rational being with his own difficult knowledge, is born of the difficult knowledge of his creator. Looking now to Victor's education, I will examine the flaws Shelley exposes in the system of private, parent-administered education that governed the education of the majority of children from England's privileged class during the Romantic period.

While Barbara Johnson fairly describes *Frankenstein* as the "story of two antithetical modes of parenting that give rise to two increasingly parallel lives," Victor and the creature's educations are connected by the disappointing roles their fathers play. While Victor's father "devoted himself to the education of his children," and is in many ways both the ideal parent and teacher, he ultimately fails in providing his son with a successful education (64). Victor states that "no youth could have passed more happily than mine. My parents were indulgent, and my companions amiable. Our studies were never forced; and by some means we always had an end placed in view, which excited us

to ardor in the prosecution of them” (66). However, in the face of this idyllic description of his education, Victor eventually shifts the responsibility for his pernicious creation on to his father (64).

While on a family vacation as a child, Victor discovers a text by Cornelius Agrippa and plunges himself with inexorable passion into its strange contents. This book stands out to Victor as the most interesting text he has ever studied and is nothing like the material on his father’s curriculum. While Victor’s childhood education was enjoyable to the extent that it was not forced or unpleasantly rigorous, there was nothing that captivated Victor’s attention equal to the work of Agrippa. As Victor describes:

When I returned home, my first care was to procure the whole works of this author, and afterwards of Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus. I read and studied the wild fancies of these writers with delight; they appeared to me treasures known to few beside myself. I have described myself as always having been imbued with a fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature. (68)

Shelley introduces us here to Victor’s intense desire to not only acquire knowledge, but to also become its master. While not a particularly keen or diligent student during his father’s lenient lessons, Victor enthusiastically researches the knowledge of classical natural philosophy in an attempt to glean all the available “secrets of nature.” His studies with his father – though enjoyable and relaxed – did not promote the type of hard work that allows students who ardently desire knowledge to thrive. His father, while generally kind and attentive did not share Victor’s love of science and did little to engage his son on the subject. As Victor describes:

Here were books, and here were men who had penetrated deeper and knew more. I took their word for all that they averred, and I became their disciple. It may appear strange that such should arise in the eighteenth century; but while I followed the routine of education in the schools of Geneva, I was, to a great degree, self taught with regard to my favourite studies. My father was not scientific, and I was left to struggle with a child's blindness, added to a student's thirst for knowledge. (69)

Despite Victor's seemingly glowing description of his childhood, he is in many ways in a similar position as both Matilda and the creature. All three are generally self-taught the type of knowledge that is most important to them and that proves to be the most difficult. While we consider it to be admirable parenting to raise a child who is so driven to learn that they choose to seek out knowledge on their own accord, there is a difference between children willingly exploring knowledge on their own and children who are forced to deal with difficult knowledge by themselves because they either lack a teacher or have a teacher who is unwilling to work with them on the knowledge they bring to the pedagogical relationship. As Victor states, his "student's thirst for knowledge" is mixed with a "child's blindness," and he does not have the necessary information to understand the context of his difficult knowledge. Here, Shelley demonstrates the need for a type of pedagogy that Britzman describes: a pedagogy that positions the teacher as an open-minded guide to knowledge and who, while administering the necessary education, leaves room in the curriculum for the knowledge that the child brings to the table – a teacher who is willing to both learn from and with his or her students.

Victor's father is not such a teacher. Although Victor is excited and impassioned

by tales of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life, the subject of natural philosophy still poses a difficult source of knowledge for Victor. Regardless of how well he studies the texts, he knows that the secrets of life will not be revealed and the knowledge must remain incomplete. He does not have the background knowledge to understand the intellectual climate in which Agrippa and his contemporaries worked, nor is he aware of the scientific developments that followed. Not able to reach a satisfactory level of engagement with the knowledge he sought in his childhood, Victor carries the desire for such a knowledge into his adulthood. What is particularly interesting, however, is not the specific nature of this knowledge, but rather Victor's understanding of how the transference of difficult knowledge into adulthood could have been prevented:

If, instead of this remark, my father had taken the pains to explain to me, that the principles of Agrippa had been entirely exploded, and that a modern system of science had been introduced, which possessed much greater powers than the ancient, because the powers of the latter were chimerical, while those of the former were real and practical; under such circumstances, I should certainly have thrown Agrippa aside, and with my imagination warmed as it was, should probably have applied myself to the more rational theory of chemistry which has resulted from modern discoveries. It is even possible, that the train of my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin. But the cursory glance my father had taken of my volume by no means assured me that he was acquainted with its contents and I continued to read with the greatest avidity. (68)

While Victor's accusation may be unfair, it does reveal a flaw in his seemingly idyllic childhood education. His father's pedagogical regime made learning easy and fun; he never forced any knowledge upon his children and never required them to behave in opposition to their own wishes. This lenient method for *imparting* knowledge is not

necessarily harmful, what Victor takes issue with is the manner in which his father responds to knowledge he *independently* acquired. Clearly Victor's father was familiar with the work of Agrippa and, as Victor indicates, he respected his father enough to trust his knowledge of subjects on which he was well informed; however, Victor's father does not take Victor's interest in the subject seriously enough to demonstrate his knowledge of Agrippa and the reasons he became obsolete, and thus Victor is not swayed by his father's flippant dismissal. The most difficult type of knowledge is not that which we are taught, but that which we discover ourselves; for Victor the most difficult, though simultaneously the most exciting knowledge, was Agrippa's theories about the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life. While the specificity of this knowledge is the device by which Victor's fixation becomes embodied in his creature, the details of this knowledge is not as important as the process through which it produces misery and destruction. Difficult knowledge – that which is not accepted and assimilated along with everything else we know – often finds an outlet in adulthood obsessions and neurosis. This being the case, it the responsibility of parents and teachers to work with a child's difficult knowledge; to stray from the curriculum in order to address the bits of knowledge that the child is struggling to work through. Victor's father, by flippantly telling his son, without explanation, to forget that which puzzles him, ignores this responsibility and leaves Victor to return to the work of sorting out this knowledge as an adult. The work of the early natural philosophers had no place in Mr. Frankenstein's lessons on how to live. Victor states that

in my education my father had taken the greatest precautions that my mind should be impressed with no supernatural horrors. I do not ever remember to have trembled at a tale of superstition, or to have feared the apparition of a spirit. Darkness had no effect upon my fancy; and the church-yard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which, from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for the worm. (Shelley 79)

The tone of this passage seems to suggest that Victor is grateful to his father for barring him from a knowledge of ghosts; however, would not a fear of darkness, a reverence for the remains of those departed, and a belief in ghosts have prevented Victor from his fatal creation? Should not have Mr. Frankenstein's lessons on how to live somehow prohibited his son from haunting graveyards and stealing limbs from the dead in order to self-servingly create something living? Indeed, Victor's father did little to teach Victor how to live; while Victor and his siblings followed the curriculum of the Genevan schools, Victor left his father's house entirely unprepared for both the education and society that existed outside of his parent's home.

When Victor is late in his adolescence, his father allows him to leave home in order to study at university. The relationship Victor develops with his teachers at the college resemble little the pedagogical relationship he had with his father. Speaking of his father, Victor states that he

cannot help remarking here the many opportunities instructors possess of directing the attention of their pupils to useful knowledge, which they utterly neglect. My father looked carelessly at the title-page of my book, and said, "Ah! Cornelius Agrippa! My dear Victor, do not waste your time upon this; it is sad trash. (68).

Like his father, the instructors Victor meets at college do not share his interest in the work of the early natural philosophers, but they do take every opportunity to direct Victor toward the type of useful knowledge that excites his interest and furthers his aptitude for scientific discovery.

Once at college, Victor reflects back on the education he received at his parent's home. As he remembers, he "ardently desired the acquisition of knowledge" and had often, when at home, thought it hard to remain during [his] youth cooped up in one place, and had longed to enter the world, and take [his] station among other human beings" (74). Here Shelley does more than hint towards the problems with private education. As we hear from Victor's testimony, the domestic sphere, no matter how loving and idyllic, does not provide the type of educational space where a sharing of information and a collective struggle with difficult knowledge can effectively take place. Victor's childhood education deteriorated into the misguided self-study of antiquated knowledge and the subject of his study was so pervasive that he moved on to university with a plaguing desire to resume the study he did not have the support or the tools to adequately carry out at home. However, despite the willingness of his college instructors to guide him in the quest for scientific innovation, Victor is once again told to abandon the work of Agrippa. Victor, while inspired by his professors, expresses disappointment over the continuing necessity to put what truly fascinated him aside:

I had retrod the steps of knowledge along the paths of time, and exchanged the discoveries of recent inquirers for the dreams of forgotten alchemists.

Besides, I had a contempt for the uses of modern natural philosophy. It was very different when the masters of the science sought immortality and power; such views, although futile, were grand; but now the scene was changed. The ambition of the inquirer seemed to limit itself to the annihilation of those visions on which my interest in science was chiefly founded. I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth. (75)

Victor discovers that while he has the tools and the knowledge for scientific discovery in his grasp, the goals of the branch of science that he studies are not of any particular interest to him. Once again, his quest for the secrets of nature and the ability to create life are thwarted. This changes, however, when he forms a pedagogical relationship with a professor who is generous enough not to be immediately dismissive of Victor's dreams. This professor, while he is an accomplice to the crime of creation that Victor eventually commits, is perhaps the best model for a teacher we see in Shelley's work. As Victor narrates:

His gentleness was never tinged by dogmatism; and his instructions were given with an air of frankness and good nature that banished every idea of pedantry. In a thousand ways he smoothed for me the path of knowledge, and made the most abstruse inquiries clear and facile to my apprehension. My application was at first fluctuating and uncertain; it gained strength as I proceeded, and soon became so ardent and eager that the stars often disappeared in the light of morning whilst I was yet engaged in my laboratory. (78)

This professor is truly ideal in a way that Victor's father was not. He treats Victor as an equal and guides him in his studies in a manner that helps him to excel without being demanding or authoritative. His understanding of pedagogy is sophisticated in the sense that he knows how to teach without oppressing the student. However, the zest for work that

this professor inspires in Victor is misdirected by Victor's continued preoccupation with the difficult knowledge of his childhood. If, under his new tutelage, Victor worked towards the projects of scientific discovery with which his colleagues struggled, he likely would have excelled and produced new understandings and applications that would mean a great deal in his branch of study; however, this type of success is not enough for Victor and he still longs for the glory that would come from figuring out the secrets that haunted him in his childhood. And thus, Victor begins the self-destructive quest for the ability to bestow life on inanimate material. A quest that he seeks no longer for the sake of the knowledge, but for the glory and fame it would ensure. While still possessing a student's thirst for knowledge, Victor is no longer plagued by a child's blindness and understands the full extent of what his success would mean. He thinks not about how the success of his experiment will cast him in the role of a parent, responsible for caring for the creature he brings to life, rather he hubristically imagines himself in the role of a god:

No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success. Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source, many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. (Shelley 82).

Victor's difficult childhood knowledge develops into an adult obsession with power and his skill as a student places him in the position to attain the power he foolishly desires. The knowledge that was difficult for his child self becomes dangerous to him as an adult:

his knowledge how to create life has imbedded within it the possibility for destruction. And it is destruction that Victor's studies lead him towards: complete mortification of both his own flesh and the buried flesh of others. Victor begins to stalk graveyards all night looking for body parts with which to assemble his creature. He becomes ill with sleep deprivation and devotes all of his energy and skill towards his unfortunate creation. Losing touch with his family and dropping all other aspects of his life, Victor becomes the mad scientist of the horror movies and deteriorates into a husk of human whose only purpose is to continue seeking knowledge that has not yet been understood by anyone. Retrospectively, Victor understands the misguided nature of his quest for knowledge and offers an interesting philosophy of education and the quest for knowledge:

A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. (84)

Here it is almost as though Shelley was speaking through Victor of both her text and her own belief of education. And indeed, it is in many ways a practical and positive philosophy. Avoiding all that which creates unhappiness and unhealthiness seems (at least superficially) to be a good idea for any student. Victor's bold statement could be the basis for a seminar on the supposed virtues of academic "balance;" to pursue knowledge only to the extent that it brings happiness and consistently raises the quality of life of a

student is the type of advice we give students to avoid them dealing with nervous breakdowns. But it is here that Victor's conclusion is at odds with necessary process of dealing with difficult knowledge. There is no way to exist in the world without coming into contact with difficult knowledge and when struggling with knowledge the mind cannot exist in a constant state of peace and tranquility. It is often in the moments of chaos and tumult that the best thought takes place; what *Frankenstein* demonstrates is how the difficult knowledge of childhood can be suppressed or avoided in such a way that the adult this child becomes is burdened with the belated project of processing his or her childhood knowledge – knowledge that is often harder to grapple when it is complicated by the desires and other knowledges of adulthood.

Such is the case with Victor; his childhood desire to uncover the secret of life translates into an adult obsession to create a new race that would acknowledge him as their god. And while Victor ultimately succeeds at creating life, his creation brings with it nothing but death and destruction. The novel ends with Victor's death and the impending suicide of the creature; however, given the terms of the creature's life, this finish is inevitable. We have learned from Freud that in order to survive loss, we must complete the work of mourning. The alternative is to become melancholic and slowly lose oneself. According to Derrida, mourning "consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the dead" (Derrida 9). The creature – an amalgamation of bodily remains – is the tangible

substance of mourning. There is no way for the creature to be rehabilitated into human society as his physical presence constantly signifies death. For the creature, and by extension for Victor, the knowledge of the creature's life and is not merely difficult, it is impossibly dangerous. It is in the joint struggle – whether between parents and children, teachers and students, or peers – that difficult knowledge is rendered endurable; Victor, because his crimes are unbelievable, and the creature, because no one will listen, cannot share their trials with their loved ones, and so must perish under the unbearable weight of what they know. The creature provides perhaps the most succinct description of the dangerous knowledge that plagues both himself and his creator:

Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling; but I learned that there was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death--a state which I feared yet did not understand.

A knowledge that can be dealt with only through death, in other words, a knowledge that cannot be dealt with, is the type of knowledge that destroys Victor, his creature, and Matilda. The creature describes this sort of knowledge as a lichen which overtakes the mind – a form of cancerous tumor that will eventually take the life of the body it infects. And indeed, people do perish from the unbearable weight of knowledge: torture, murder, rape, and other violent atrocities that exist as difficult knowledge for anyone can become dangerous knowledge for someone depending on the way by which they come to a knowledge of such an act. While the struggle with dangerous knowledge often leads to death or destruction, the struggle with difficult knowledge is essentially a humanizing

process; As Shelley's work suggests, the goal of education should not be to give children the tools win the struggle (for such a thing is impossible), but rather not to suppress the source.

CONCLUSION

The only way to avoid two extremes equally injurious to morality would be to contrive some way of combining a public and private education. Thus to make men citizens two natural steps might be taken, which seem directly to lead to the desired point; for the domestic affections, that first open the heart to the various modifications of humanity, would be cultivated, whilst the children were nevertheless allowed to spend great part of their time, on terms of equality, with other children.

Mary Wollstonecraft

A Vindication on the Rights of Women (Chapter IX)

Mary Shelley's intervention into the discussion of childhood education may not have been as direct as her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft's; however Shelley's fictional work demonstrates similar beliefs about education and performs a similar type of work as Wollstonecraft's treatises on education. Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* are filled with a diverse array of scenes of education that are in some way characterized by pedagogical failure. Each scene is played out differently and has unique complications that prevent both the student and the teacher from enjoying a positive and productive learning experience; however, what connects these scenes is the presence of difficult knowledge. Difficult knowledge – which has a number of different meanings in both Britzman's work and my own – can simply be described as a type of knowledge that poses a particular challenge for the knower. Whether it comes in the form of a personal or a social trauma, difficult knowledge is a type of knowledge that can never fully be mastered, assimilated, or understood. For example, no matter what approach we take to

teaching the Holocaust to sixth graders, there is no way that that knowledge can be handed to students in a neat parcel that can be acquired and immediately stored as information. Knowledge of such an event carries with it an affective investment that troubles the student in ways that are necessary to their development as informed and functioning citizens.

Or at least this type of knowledge *should not* be handed to students as a complete and finished product of knowledge. Britzman's work focuses a great deal on the need for a teacher who is willing to engage students in open discussions of difficult knowledge – discussions that do not have a predetermined outcome in which the child succeeds at mastering a subject that can never really be mastered. The teachers in *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* are not the type of teachers that Britzman calls for. Indeed, Shelley's work is as much about the failure of parents to educate their children to be functioning members of society as it is about anything else. While others have pointed out the dismal fate of parenting in Shelley's work, it is particularly their failure to be good teachers that has concerned me in this thesis. How can a parent– as in the case of Victor's father – be a good parent and a bad teacher? I believe that Shelley, like Wollstonecraft, would answer this by arguing that the home should be a place of equality, tolerance and love, but that no matter how happy the home is, a public school where children work with their peers and study with the help of a trained teacher who does not have the same type of complicated relationship with the children that parents have is entirely necessary for a

child's development. All the pedagogical failures that take place in Shelley's texts do so because the inevitable difficult knowledge of childhood is fraught with especially strained and transgressive filial relationships.

Difficult knowledge in Shelley's work is not only the difficult knowledge of social traumas; in many cases, what is difficult is the child's knowledge of their tragic origins or dysfunctional familial relationships. While the goal of education should not be to free children from these necessary types of knowledge, a public education system that removes children – if only for a few hours a day – from the tensions of family life would better enable children to struggle with their difficult knowledge in a situation that does not exacerbate the subject with the intensity of filial ties. While not dismissing the importance of a healthy and supportive home life, Shelley argues for an education system that is not privatized – for a public space in which children can join in a collective struggle with difficult knowledge. While our current public school system is in many ways the radical coed school system imagined by Wollstonecraft and Shelley, Shelley's work still has particularly crucial implications for the current state of education. Shelley's work does not generalize the radically divergent experiences of childhood. The children in *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* are all to some extent exceptions from the typical model of how the Romantic child was raised and educated. While we do have a public education system in place, that does not mean that our teachers are necessarily any better equipped to deal with the difficult knowledge of childhood than Matilda or Victor's father – not to

mention the thousands of children belonging to fundamentally Christian parents, especially in the United States, who are educated at home in order that their parents may block out the “difficult” secular knowledge that exists in opposition to their own attempts at indoctrination. Mary Shelley’s first two novels are rich with possibilities for understanding how and how not to educate children. Existing, in many ways, as pieces of difficult knowledge themselves, *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* demonstrate the process by which difficult knowledge is mishandled by educators and consequently takes on the form of dangerous knowledge.

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