Sympathy, Imagination, Sight: Trauma and Othering Within Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

Within Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein*, high importance is placed on three phenomenon: sympathy, imagination, and sight. Throughout this essay I aim to bring these three together and investigate their relationship to each other and to the trauma that is so rampant within the text. This paper will comprise three major sections. First, I will use Adam Smith’s philosophy surrounding sympathy as a foundation to understand what hinders characters’ inability to connect to the Creature. I will express how trauma stems from characters’ inability to sympathize, and address what is responsible for this sympathetic lack: namely Victor’s inability to imagine outside of himself, reliance on sight to determine sympathetic worth, and the ability for imagination to be warped by sight and create fear rather than sympathy. Mired by disgust, shame, and fear, characters are unable to move past physical appearance in order to hear, understand, and sympathize. Second, I will analyze how characters must construct categories of otherness in an attempt to understand and label that which they cannot emotionally connect with, and distance themselves from what disgusteds and terrifies them. Once individuals are othered sympathy is severed and imagination is used by other characters to construct the other into a monster rather than a worthy fellow. This section will ultimately look at the way characters respond to the Creature in terms of sight, imagination, and sympathy. The ultimate outcome of othering will be furthered with a focus on how it creates a culture within the text of violence, and fear. I will further the conversation of otherness by describing how the trauma within the text is
compounded by the reader’s response to both the Creature and Victor. Thirdly, I will shift towards optimism and hope. I will express the possibility of words to transcend the barrier of sight, the potential for narration as a form of alternative sympathy, and the potential for education as a space that can encourage both narration and sympathy. Within the text I will focus on instances where words are valued over sight, and bring attention to the layered narrative created by overlapping voices and stories. Education will be looked at within the text through the Creature's relationship to learning and reading, and will then be expanded to encompass the reader’s experience with the text. I will conclude with an exploration of the ways engaging with *Frankenstein* can serve to bring reader’s attention to their own relationship with sympathy, imagination, sight, and otherness before then thinking about these themes on a larger societal level.

Adam Smith, one of the major philosophers of the eighteenth century, connects sympathy to imagination and sight in his work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Within this text he aims to explain the forces that allow individuals to effectively become members of a social group (Braeman). He argues that sympathy is the foundation that holds together a healthy society. In his work, he emphasizes the important role that imagination plays in our capacity to feel sympathy for one another, and outlines how senses, such as sight, will never alone enable a sympathetic bond:

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation…Our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. (Smith 9)
In short, because people will never have the power to truly understand and feel what others are experiencing, it is one’s ability to imagine oneself in the situation of another that allows sympathy to be possible. In addition, Smith expresses the notion that senses are not enough to allow sympathy and may even hinder sympathetic possibility. He believed that sympathy is strongest when those who share it have a common bond, “the wider the distance, physical or social, that separated people, the weaker the bond’s influence” (Braeman). Therefore, if people do not share a common language, a common location, a common appearance, it will be harder to sympathize. Imagination, on the other hand, is far reaching and stretches the bounds of commonality.

This is where the trouble in *Frankenstein* begins. Characters rely on sight in order to see value in others. When value is seen, characters are motivated to actively connect, imagine, and sympathize. When appearance deems one as unworthy, sympathy is blocked. This block leads directly to trauma for “Nature, when she formed man for society, endowed him with an original desire to please, and an original aversion to offend his brethren. She taught him to feel pleasure in their favourable, and pain in their unfavourable regard” (Braeman).

Let me begin with the creation of the Creature as a scene that fluidly connects imagination, sympathy and sight. Imagination allows the Creature’s existence and simultaneously denies him a happy one. It is only by imagination that Victor is able to create the Creature. From fragmented bodies to an entire being Victor imagines the Creature into existence. When contemplating what form to make his creation, he explains: “I doubted at first whether I should attempt the creation of a being like myself or one of simpler organization; but my imagination was too much exalted by my first success to permit me to doubt of my ability to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man” (Shelley 34). Victor's imagination drives
him to creation, but it also limits him. The most glorious and advanced body Victor can imagine is one that has the form of a human, one that looks like him. His foresight into the future also revolves around himself, “A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (Shelley 34). Victor is unable to imagine anything outside of himself. The Creature’s image, the Creature’s future, all of it centers around Victor. Where Adam Smith describes imagination as being the only way for individuals to conceive of the feelings of another, Victor cannot use his imagination to move past himself.

While working on the Creature, Victor is able to imagine but his sight is blinded. Seasons change without notice for, as Victor describes, “my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature” (35). Looking back, Victor reflects that “during my first experiment, a kind of enthusiastic frenzy had blinded me… my eyes were shut” (Shelley 128). However, the moment the Creature is bestowed with life Victor’s senses switch. His sight is restored but his sympathetic imagination is halted. Two things happen after the Creature gains animation. First, Victor truly sees it for the first time, unclouded by his narcissistic fantasies. Victor has been blinded while making the Creature, unable to see past his work; once it is finished he sees it for the first time in the light of hideousness. Second, Victor is unable to imagine himself in the Creature’s position. While working he was able to imagine the Creature into something it was not, yet when it comes alive Victor sees it for the first time as a monster, “I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived” (Shelley 38). Before animation Victor refers to the Creature as “he”, afterwards the Creature becomes an “it”. Ultimately, Victor can only imagine when his imaginings center around him. When the Creature takes his first breath he becomes independent. Victor no longer has complete imaginative control. When the Creature receives the
individual identity that comes with being alive and sentient, Victor loses his ability to imagine, and therefore his ability to sympathize, with the Creature.

The first thing Victor describes the Creature doing is opening it’s eyes, “by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the Creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs” (Shelley 37). Sight is emphasized as important. The Creature sees before he breaths. It is almost as if sight is what gives the Creature life, rather than breath. As soon as Victor sees that the Creature can see, can move, can breath, he becomes terrified and agitated. It is sight, therefore, that plays a large part in Victor’s rejection of the Creature.

Through sight, characters decide who is worthy of sympathy based on appearance. Physical beauty is prized and emphasized throughout the novel: “William, the youngest of our family, was yet an infant, and the most beautiful little fellow in the world; his lively blue eyes, dimpled cheeks, and endearing manners, inspired the tenderest affection” (Shelley 25). Worth is determined visually. William’s beauty encourages affection. To contrast with William, the Creature is described thusly: “his yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with its watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same color as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips” (Shelley 37). Where William is blessed with “lively blue eyes” the Creature is cursed with “watery eyes”. William, who is beautiful, is loved for his appearance which “inspired the tenderest affection” (Shelley 25). The Creature, who is hideous, is rejected for his appearance which inspires horror. Sympathy is therefore connected to sight, for sight determines who is worthy of sympathy. As Smith emphasizes, It becomes harder for one to imagine
themselves in the position of someone unlike them visually. Walton references the importance of sight to sympathy as he describes his want of a friend on his voyage: “I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me; whose eyes would reply to mine” (Shelley 8). Walton references the importance of sight, matching sympathy to eyes as a link for connection. When beauty is absent, in either physical difference or ugliness, that individual is deemed as unworthy of sympathy. Others refuse to imagine themselves in the position of that which visually disgusts them, and therefore the time needed to imagine is denied and sympathy is absent.

The Creature’s appearance cuts him off completely from sympathy. If sympathy becomes more and more difficult when individuals are different, sympathy for the creature is deemed nearly impossible. Physically, the Creature is visually different from every other character in the novel. To compound his difference he is also ugly in a world where worth is based on beauty. Constructed out of both human and animal remains he is monstrous, unlike anything ever seen before, “almost too horrible for human eyes” (Shelley 72). This disgust cuts off the potential for communication. The first man (other than Victor) to see the Creature, “turned on hearing a noise; and perceiving me, shrieked loudly, and, quitting the hut, ran across the fields with a speed of which his debilitated form hardly appeared capable” (Shelley 78). The Creature brings an entire village to panic with nothing more than his appearance: “the children shrieked, and one of the women fainted. The whole village was roused; some fled, some attacked me, until grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons, I escaped to the open country” (Shelley 78). When Felix, Agatha, and Safie first lay eyes on the Creature, Felix strikes him with a stick, Agatha faints, and Safie rushes out of sight. The rustic shoots the Creature when he sees it, despite the fact that the Creature has just saved his daughter from drowning. Time after time, the Creature’s image instills fear and panic within those who view it. These examples serve to
show that while imagination can allow sympathy—when beauty or similarity deems one as worthy of it—imagination can also create fear when one’s appearance is hideous. This is exhibited in William who imagines the Creature as a monster and upon seeing him shrieks:

“Monster! ugly wretch! you wish to eat me, and tear me to pieces— you are an ogre— let me go” (Shelley 109). In this instance imagination causes William to believe the creature will eaten and desecrate him. Sight warps the imagination of every seeing character that comes into contact with the Creature. Smith outlines imagination as the enabler of sympathy. The novel complicates this notion by revealing how imagination can also cause characters to form ideas of the Creature as a monster, cutting off sympathy through fear and assumed mal intent on the side of the Creature.

When characters see the Creature they either run, threaten, or hurt him. There is no instinct to listen. Without communication no one is able to understand the Creature enough to sympathize with him. Despite the Creature’s positive actions and initial benevolent intentions, he is immediately viewed as heinous and destructive because of his appearance. The Creature laments, “a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster” (Shelley 102). Prejudice can also be understood in this context as imagination. Characters have preconceived notions of the way they think the Creature will act. These notions are based on his appearance, and imagination connects his image to his suspected actions. The Creature approaches people with kindness and a longing for love yet they react with violence and terror. The De Lacey family drive him from their house. The rustic shoots him. William threatens him. Villagers throw stones at him. Victor shuns him. The Creature is unable to receive sympathy or love. Characters are unable to move past his physical
appearance to give him sympathy and affection. As the Creature states, their ability to judge properly is clouded by prejudice as they behold his figure.

Victor has the unique experience of being the Creature’s creator. He is the only individual that understands the Creature’s creation. He is the only one who actively chose the Creature’s appearance. In this sense, the appearance of the Creature should not disgust Victor as much as it does other characters because he is responsible for its creation. And yet, he is still repulsed by the Creature’s form. Whenever he is touched by the Creature’s words, all it takes is a glimpse of the Creature’s face to throw Victor again into a torrent of loathing. After hearing the Creature’s tale he experiences fleeting compassion, “His words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him, and sometimes felt a wish to console him; but when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened, and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred” (Shelley 113). Even when moved by the Creature’s words, sight overpowers Victor’s sympathy and turns him again toward hatred. Victor’s role as creator does allow him to give the Creature the opportunity to tell his story. This leaves Victor as the only character to hear the Creature’s story as told by the Creature himself. With an understanding of the Creature’s birth and life Victor has a much clearer understanding of the Creature than any other character in the novel. However, sympathy is still impossible. The sight of the Creature overpowers Victor’s understanding of its creation. Like William, Victor’s imagination takes the Creature's appearance and applies it to the way he believes the Creature will behave: “I imagined that the monster seized me; I struggled furiously, and fell down in a fit” (Shelley 41). Sight overpowers Victor’s innate connection to the Creature, causing his imagination to turn from its sympathetic possibility and instead lead Victor into a feverish anxiety.
I have spoken about Victor’s relationship with the Creature as one that should innately allow a higher possibility of sympathy. However, it must also be acknowledged that the opposite could also be true. Unlike any of the other characters who engage with the Creature, Victor must grapple not only with disgust but also with shame. James Hatch, in his essay “Disruptive affects: Shame, Disgust, and Sympathy in *Frankenstein*” discusses shame in detail. He explains how both Victor and the Creature are shamed by each other: “The parent’s absence shames the child, the child’s presence shames the parent. He does not wish his creation to identify with him, and he is ashamed of him and of having created him” (Hatch 39). In this sense while disgust still operates to create a barrier between Victor and the Creature, it is compounded by shame: Victor is disgusted by the Creature’s appearance and also disgusted that he is responsible for creating him. This disgust, not only at the Creature but at himself, is what causes Victor shame. Victor should be the one character who is able to look past the Creature’s appearance, being the one who is responsible for his appearance. He understands the Creature’s body in a way no other character can. He imagined the Creature into existence but is still unable to imagine himself in the position of the Creature and sympathize. Shame destroys his ability to be emotionally intimate. A prominent characteristic of shame is the lowering of the head and eyes: “The lowered eyes and head of shame break the circuit of looking…Tomkins considers the ‘look-look,’ or what he also calls the ‘eye-to-eye scene,’ to be more intimate even than sexual intimacy so that the shame that intervenes here is almost more active…as it works to counteract the overwhelming nature of intimacy” (Hatch 38). When Victor first senses the creatures approach he describes how “a mist came over my eyes” (Shelley 72). Such a mist serves to temporarily cloud Victor’s eyes, symbolic of the inability for visual intimacy. In this sense shame, in addition
to disgust, hinder Victor’s ability to sympathize with the Creature. The shame that causes him to look away from the Creature makes the potential for future connection and sympathy impossible.

From the moment of his waking the Creature is met with people’s disgust, fear, and loathing because of his grotesquely different body.

The mixture of fear and disgust that occurs in characters’ reactions to the creature means that as the creature’s face is revealed as frightening and disgusting, it becomes all too visible, yet all too unseeable. It cannot be born— it must be fled from in fear and turned away from in disgust, but it is not invisible. It is all too visible, too seen: it is thus unseeable— an unbearably ugly sight that makes the viewer turn away, close his eyes, or depart. (Hatch 35)

It is not simply the initial viewing of the Creature that hinders sympathy through warped imagination. It is the after image, the body that continues to be seen after eyes are shut or covered that inhibits characters from hearing and understanding the Creature once he has been initially seen. With each rejection, the Creature sinks further and further into a state of depression and fury. His reaction to rejection directly connects to Smith’s notion that inborn within individuals is a need and desire to be liked and accepted. When these positive interpersonal connections are absent, it leads to pain and suffering for the individual lacking in them. The Creature has offended all he has come across, he has never been seen in a favorable eye. In his final speech the Creature laments, “once I falsely hoped to meet with beings, who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of bringing forth” (Shelley 177). However, he sadly reflects “no sympathy may I ever find” (Shelley 177). People were able to find truth in his appearance; through his grotesque appearance
the truth they found was in a warped imagination of monstrosity. Characters’ judgment of the Creature’s animosity, based on his physique, is enough to sever any emotional connection.

The only man who does not quake in terror at the Creature’s appearance is blind. He is the only character unaffected by either shame or disgust. His blindness allows the Creature to interact with him unobstructed by sight. Before the creature speaks with De Lacey he reflects upon his plan “to enter the dwelling when the blind old man should be alone. I had sagacity enough to discover, that the unnatural hideousness of my person was the chief object of horror with those who had formerly beheld me. My voice, although harsh, had nothing terrible in it” (Shelley 101). The Creature expresses awareness of the effect of his appearance. He displays hope that the old De Lacey man will take the time to listen because he will be unable to see. Unable to see that which creates disgust, De Lacey is able to hear to the Creature’s words rather than instantly react based on his appearance. He does not find truth in the Creature’s appearance as all the seeing characters do. His imagination cannot be swayed by the way the Creature’s looks, and his sympathetic link to the Creature will not be weakened by perceived visual difference. Therefore, De Lacey must take the time to listen in order to understand. And with understanding of the Creature as an individual, rather than as a disgusting and terrifying monster, sympathy may be possible.

Essaka Joshua describes the importance of blindness within works of literature:

“Blindness is used most often as a trope for being without the kind of prejudice belonging to sighted culture: the fear of stigmatization and of physical difference. Blindness is an enabler of the power of words… [Frankenstein] also associates blindness with creativity” (Joshua 57-59). The prejudice that clouds other characters eyes is not present in De Lacey. It is clear that his blindness enables him to hear the Creature in a different way than any other character has been
able to. As Joshua notes, blindness not only enables words over appearance, it encourages creativity; because De Lacey is unable to see the Creature, he must use his creativity and imagination to construct an image of him. De Lacey’s ability to imagine the Creature allows him to get closest to Smith’s notion of sympathy. Sighted characters are unable to imagine themselves in the position of the Creature. It is difficult for people to connect emotionally to something so different and so disgusting. No one wants to imagine themselves as something hideous or evil, and that is how they see the Creature. De Lacey is able to imagine himself in the Creature’s position and sympathize because he is able to find connection in their common tongue. Sight has no influence over De Lacey and he is the one character able to get closest to true sympathy with the Creature. Through this character, Shelley argues that sight impedes sympathy. She places higher value on words to convey truth, meaning, and emotion. It is through stories that characters are able to gain insight into the lives and feelings of others. Sight on the other hand produces snap judgments and dichotomies: beautiful versus ugly, good versus evil, human versus monster. There is potential for De Lacey to be the first character to focus solely on the Creature's words, uninhibited by the Creature’s image. Unfortunately, the rest of the cottage dwellers return home before a full conversation is able to be had. With them, they bring all the fear and disgust that was absent without sight. Hope for sympathy is crushed.

So far, I have examined the relationship between sight, imagination, and sympathy within the novel, and focused on the Creature and his interactions with other characters. It has been established that sympathy is only possible through imagination. However, imagination also has the power to negatively influence character's view of the Creature as a monster. The key difference between sympathetic imagination and monstrous imagination is sight. Physical similarity allows for a stronger sympathetic bonds. Beauty also serves to deem individuals as
worthy of sympathy and value. Physical difference or deformity, as exemplified by the Creature, steers characters away from connection and turns them instead toward fear and disgust. Now that it is understood why sympathy is gapingly absent from the text, let us move on to explore the consequences of such an absence. When characters interact with the Creature they are unable to understand him because he visually pushes them away. With a lack of understanding, characters must create a category of the other to place on the Creature. They attempt to understand and label that which they cannot emotionally connect with by distancing themselves from what they fear. This category of otherness creates a culture of violence and fear. The following section will explore the ways characters respond to the Creature and how their response creates a culture of fear, violence, and trauma.

People label the Creature as other, that which is not like them. The act of pushing the Creature into this category of otherness is a traumatic act for both the Creature and those who label him. The Creature’s otherness is a result of his inability to be sympathized with. The creature is left lonely, ostracized, and hated; and those who ostracize him are turned to violence and left in fear. The culture born out of the ability to other individuals is violent as it forces people to give up sympathy, uses imagination only to distance rather than connect individuals, and turns them instead toward fear and violence. If sympathy is, as Smith believes, an essential and innate human moral sentiment, creating otherness destroys humanity. As the Creature explains, “my heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy; and, when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred, it did not endure the violence of change without torture, such as you cannot even imagine” (Shelley 176). Misery and hatred, caused by repeated rejection turn the Creature from his benevolent state of love to a state of hatred. Hatred moves the Creature to turn against his natural benevolence and kill. Similarly, people are turned from their state of
sympathy to a state of fear, which allows them also to turn to violence. Both the Creature and those who see him are driven to violence. When people are afraid their violence seems justified. Characters are able to hurt and attempt to kill the Creature in the name of self-defense. Both Creature and mankind as a result of othering are driven to lay aside their nature and change to one much darker. The Creature remembers his change as a violent one. Not only does the change turn the Creature into a violent beast, the act of changing in and of itself is described as violent. The Creature is ripped from his peaceful demeanor through anguish and rejection. His change is excruciating. The same can be said for those who interact with him. Even the kind Felix is ripped from sympathy through forced and artificial dichotomies. He sees the Creature in peaceful conversation with De Lacey and instantly categorizes him as a threatening beast. To hate and to fear are themselves violent assaults against the ability to sympathize, as they dash out the possibility of sympathy.

The othering that takes place in *Frankenstein* is dangerous because it does more than simply separate groups into categories. It affects everyone in the novel by creating a culture of fear and encouraging a culture of violence. If sympathy is the glue that holds a community together, creating categories of otherness has the potential to tear it apart. The inability for people to sympathize with the Creature because of his otherness not only creates devastating trauma in the Creature, it traumatizes every character that interacts with the Creature. From the moment of the Creature’s waking, Victor lives in a feverish and devastating state of fear and anxiety. Initially, this trauma stems solely from the small glimpse Victor receives of the Creature’s waking, before Victor runs from his house in terror. In this sense, before the Creature takes any actions worthy of hatred, Victor creates his own trauma because of the revulsion he feels for something that looks different from him. Victor uses his imaginative energy to construct
the Creature as monstrous instead of attempting to understand the Creature as an individual. In the same sense, every other encounter the Creature has with characters results in fear for the person who sees him. As Felix states, “my wife and my sister will never recover their horror” (Shelley 105). Trauma results not from the Creature’s behavior or actions towards other people, but is created by people who assume brutality and evil when they encounter him.

The fear and the lack of sympathy felt towards something that is different also breeds a culture of violence. When individuals are fearful they are able to lash out violently against that which they fear in the name of self-defense. The harm they inflict is guilt-free because it is done in the name of protection. The Creature explains this unfair phenomenon, “am I to be thought the only criminal, when all human kind sinned against me? Why do you not hate Felix, who drove his friend from his door with contumely? Why do you not execrate the rustic who sought to destroy the savior of his child? Nay, these are virtuous and immaculate beings! I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked and trampled on” (Shelley 177-178). When the Creature sought affection and belonging, Felix struck him with a stick and threw him from his house; when the Creature saved a young girl the rustic shot at him with a gun; when the Creature sought companionship in neighboring villages, the inhabitants drove him away with rocks. In all of the described encounters the Creature is treated like a villain. He is handled violently and no remorse is shown for his treatment. Because he is labeled as an extreme other he is feared and violence is condoned.

This same phenomenon of justifiable violence through othering is not only present in the Creature. Justine falls victim as well. Justine is othered the moment she is suspected for the murder of William. As she walks into her trial, “all the kindness which her beauty might otherwise have excited, was obliterated in the minds of the spectators by the imagination of the
enormity she was supposed to have committed” (Shelley 58). Sympathy is denied Justine, just as it is the denied to the Creature. Interestingly, in this instance it is imagination that overpowers sight, rather than sight distorting imagination. In both instances however, sympathy is denied and either the Creature or Justine is othered. Once the othering takes place the ability for sympathy to make its way back into the narrative becomes infinitely more miniscule than before. When a character is othered they are ostracized and banished so far away from the normative group that they are denied humaneness. The Creature is a monster for his visual appearance, Justine is a monster for her perceived actions. Either way, once othered, characters deem that individual as too different to be worthy of sympathy.

The 1931 film adaptation of *Frankenstein* combines the visual otherness of the Creature with the criminal otherness of Justine. While constructing the Creature Igor accidentally gives him the brain of a criminal instead of a “normal” brain. Within the film the Creature is represented as incapable of speech and violent from birth. The film offers no comparison of a being created with a “normal” brain so it is left ambiguous if it is the Creature’s criminal brain or beastly body that cause his tendency toward violence (*Frankenstein* 1931). In this way, the film others those deemed criminal by arguing that their brain is visually-- the brain itself looks distorted and different from the “normal” brain-- and chemically different from the brain of an innocent individual. In addition, the film visually others the Creature by making him a monstrous green, not even close to a natural skin color. The film presents the Creature the way characters in the novel imagine him. He is monstrous, he is criminal, he is dangerous, he is feared. In addition he is denied speech, just as characters in the novel react to him violently without any type of attempt at verbal communication.
While the way in which readers interact with characters outside of the text is different than characters’ interactions within the novel; the reaction of readers mirrors the creation of other present within the work itself. Melissa Bissonette speaks to the critical process students tend to go through when they first encounter the novel. In her article “Teaching the Monster: Frankenstein and Critical Thinking” she describes how “student readers often switch with a taste for the unambiguous, from presuming the monster to be wholly bad, to exonerating him completely” (Bissonette 109). Readers have a similar need to categorize and dichotomize just as characters need to label and other. The trauma created by othering within the novel is compounded by readers’ response to the Creature. The need for readers to look at him in black and white terms of either monstrous other or mistreated victim brings to life the trauma that lives within the pages of the book. Even though readers never truly see the Creature, as characters do, reading itself is an act of imagination and therefore individuals are able to take the brief visual description of the Creature’s body and tailor his monstrosity to their own horror. Unlike the blind man, readers are told that the Creature is hideous, they are given a description, and what lacks in a presented image is made up for the mind's imaginings and creation of what would be individually horrifying to each reader. Readers, like the characters, are unable to see the Creature in complex terms. They segment him into either “good” or “evil”, refusing to see him as an individual and complex being. The way Bissonette responds to this reader trend is by “returning to the monster as a monster, refusing to allow him to melt into a symbol in the classroom” (Bissonette 108). Characters within the text must take time to listen and understand in order to sympathize and not fall prey to othering. Similarly, readers must take time to understand. They too need to put energy into seeing the whole Creature, with all his assets and flaws, lest they fall into the same trap of labeling him.
To summarize, characters instinctually other when they encounter something that disturbs them. They other the Creature, who visually disturbs them, and Justine, who emotionally disturbed them. Othering leads to a shutdown of sympathy and ultimately dehumanizes an individual to the point of distance where a sympathetic link is almost nonexistent. Othering tears individuals from sympathetic potential, and therefore humanity, and turns them instead towards fear and violence. The ability to other is present within the text and also within the reader, further illuminating the capacity for individuals the other.

Despite the fear, violence and trauma that results from the a lack of sympathy and the creation of the other I would like to end on a hopeful note. As I mentioned earlier, De Lacey is the character that comes closest to true sympathy with the Creature. While other characters hinder the ability for De Lacey and the Creature to develop a further relationship, the conversation they are able to have does lend potential for optimism. I would like to end by discussing the power that words have to transcend the barrier of sight, the power that narrative has to serve as an alternative form of sympathy, and the power of education as a platform for both expressive words and narrative sympathy.

After hearing the brief beginning of the Creature’s tale De Lacey explains, “I am blind, and cannot judge of your countenance, but there is something in your words which persuades me that you are sincere” (Shelley 102). In this instance the power words have to create human connection and sympathy is expressed by De Lacey. Hatch furthers the discussion, “where the affects of shame and disgust serve to cut the Creature off from being part of a social structure, language becomes the only bridge between himself and human beings. In its relationship with sympathy, language figures in the novel as an assurance that an inner moral state of benevolence can be communicated to others, overriding the automaticity of the effects of disgust” (Hatch 39).
When the Creature first finds Victor he begs for the chance to tell his story, “Let your compassion be moved, and do not disdain me. Listen to my tale: when you have heard that, abandon or commiserate me, as you shall judge that I deserve. But hear me.” (Shelley 73). The Creature implores Victor to hold of the immediate judgment of sight and to take the time to hear his words before passing judgement. The power of words is again shown through the Creature’s interactions with the blind man, and his limited ability to capture Victor’s attention and tell his tale. Listening to the Creature’s words serves to temporarily allow Victor, De Lacey, and Walton brief understanding and fleeting moments of sympathy. Walton is the last character to have a conversation with the Creature. After hearing the Creature’s anguished response to Victor’s death, Walton writes “His voice seemed suffocated; and my first impulses, which had suggested to me the duty of obeying the dying request of my friend, in destroying his enemy, were now suspended” (Shelley 175). Hearing the Creature’s voice is enough to make Walton question the final request of his dead friend. Within the Creature’s voice is anguish, and while Walton may not be able to fully understand the Creature, he can at least sympathize with the feeling of despair as one that he has also experienced. While these moments of verbal connection are present within Frankenstein they are fleeting and unsuccessful, leaving the Creature ultimately without any one instance of complete sympathetic understanding. However, the power of words is still expressed in their brief ability to incite sympathetic possibility in the face of visual monstrosity.

Where individual face-to-face communication and sympathy may fail repeatedly in the novel, Shelley offers the production of narration as an alternative version of sympathy (Britton). Dominick LaCapra also believes that narrative has the power to heal trauma. He explains that “acting out, working over…working through…analyzing and ‘giving voice’ to the past” allows
victims to come to terms with their trauma and begin the process of healing (LaCapra 186).

Trauma is rampant within *Frankenstein*. Readers are responsible for reacting to characters in the same traumatic ways characters react to each other. Moving past reliance on sight, warped imagination, disgust, shame and fear into a place where there is potential for understanding and sympathy is difficult. However, even within the text itself it is represented as possible: “As it is experienced or anticipated, sympathy generates the shifts in genre and perspective that open the novel’s narrative layers” (Britton 10). While characters cannot sympathize with the Creature initially, a narrative is created from his experiences. The novel is framed by Walton’s letters in which he tells his sister Frankenstein’s story. Within Walton’s letters Frankenstein tells his story. Within Frankenstein’s story the Creature tells his story. Within the Creature’s story he tells the De Lacey’s family story. Stories are heard and re-told creating layer upon layer of narrative complexity. From each individual narrative, characters who hear it and by extension the reader, are able to reach a level of sympathy impossible for characters initially. Each individual layer combines to form the singular text of *Frankenstein*. The possibility for future sympathy is even anticipated in Walton’s sister who may one day receive the letters and tell the story yet again. In addition, readers also become carriers of the narrative with the potential to initiate sympathetic expansion through discussion of the story with others.

The classroom is a perfect space for such discussion to take place. Through looking at education within *Frankenstein* and also looking at how the text itself is used in classroom spaces I aim to show how education can itself become a space of sympathy and positive imagination. Jeffrey Alexander believes that “by allowing members of wider publics to participate in the pain of others, cultural traumas broaden the realm of social understanding and sympathy, and they provide powerful avenues of new forms of social incorporation” (Alexander 24). Within
educational spaces, teachers and leaders can encourage individuals to engage in the process Alexander describes. By reading *Frankenstein*, students must engage in the trauma of the characters within the novel’s pages. In addition, readers must also engage with the connection between the themes present in the novel and their own experiences of sympathy, imagination, sight, and othering. By creating a communal conversation around these issues individuals can create a group understanding and can begin to sympathize with characters in the text, each other, and by extension the wider community of individuals they interact with.

*Frankenstein* has been widely read, taught, and celebrated for nearly 200 years: teachers and professors use the text in primary and tertiary classrooms; writers and directors transform the novel for the stage and the screen in countless adaptations; the novel’s iconic characters even appear in television shows and popular culture. There are clearly many aspects within the text that continue to resonate to a large audience. The novel continues to speak a truth that individuals are still encountering and grappling with. Largely, I think the continued pull towards the novel is that the focuses within it are incredibly present in today's world: failed sympathy, fixation of sight, a culture of fear and violence born out of othering, and the need for dialogue and healing. We continue to live in a society that struggles to sympathize, judges individuals deemed different based on sight, is able to imagine other individuals as monstrous, and has difficulty creating space for honest dialogue and narrative sympathy. The simple act of engaging with the novel forces readers to engage differently with the world around them. Sydny Conger reflects that her “[students] have come to feel an empathy for Mary Shelley’s social outcast- a radical empathy- that they cannot resist, one that induces them not only to reread Victor’s story but invites them to read other stories differently thereafter” (Behrendt 66). I would like to add
that reading *Frankenstein* not only challenges readers to read other stories differently, it also implores them to look at the world around them differently.

Reading is itself a self reflexive activity. Within the novel reading is used not only as a base for gaining knowledge about the world but also gaining knowledge about one’s self. As the Creature learns he is forced to also reflect on himself. As he listens to Felix’s English instruction with Saffie the Creature observes “the words induced me to turn towards myself” (Shelley 90). When the Creature reads about birth and growth he thinks about it in the context of his own creation. When he reads *Paradise Lost* he connects to Adam as one created, but establishes a closer emotional bond to Satan as one rejected, “As I read… I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition… my person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?” (Shelley 97). Readers engage with the same practice of creating personal connections and asking questions. As they encounter characters who are unable to sympathize they are forced to see when they have perhaps failed to sympathize; when they notice how imagination can both create sympathy and also warp perception they may ask which use is most familiar to them; when they talk about the characters’ views surrounding visual beauty and disgust they may start to notice ways they live in a society that values appearance and fears visual difference.

Could Frankenstein be used as a text to bring sympathy to the forefront of people's minds? Could it help them become consciously aware of their reliance on sight and focus instead on the cultivation of imagination? Could they begin to notice the way they and the greater community others people deemed different or monstrous? Could they begin to change the pattern? There is no conclusive way to answer these questions, but I sincerely hope the act of reading, of thought, of discussion, changes the course of our collective future.
Works Cited


Behrendt, Stephen, and Anne Mellor. *Approaches to Teaching Shelley's Frankenstein*. New York:


