The Intersections Between Epistolarity and Sentimentalism in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Frankenstein*

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Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is a text that literary critics have long noted for its formal complexity. From layering multiple narrative levels to incorporating epistolary narration, the novel stands out as a fusion of diverse literary forms that is as hybridized as the Creature it depicts. This narrative structure inevitably carries interpretive weight while also shedding light on literature's ability to reflect and complicate the cultural values that shape it. Sentimentalism, in particular, is a prominent social ideal with which *Frankenstein* engages, and the novel's formal qualities affect how sentimentalism functions in the text. For instance, Kirsten Martin notes that "Shelley's frames layer on top of one another to guide the reader through all of the novel's disparate pieces. This technique … creates the conditions for sympathetic engagement" between readers and characters (601-02). Similarly, Hyewon Shin posits that "the epistolary frame fosters affective connections between characters (letter writers) and readers (their addressees)" (546). Such scholars associate sentimental emotions with the novel's epistolary, multi-level structure, a formal quality that *Frankenstein* shares with one of the many texts that its characters reference, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). Of course, the explicit mention of this work in *Frankenstein* is admittedly brief; however, both texts' combining of epistolary and framed narrative structures merits a closer reading that considers the evolving relationships between literary forms and cultural values that these novels exemplify. In short, a comparison of these works will bring to light a structural and functional shift in epistolarity, beginning as a vehicle for communicating interior emotional experience and transitioning into a simultaneous call for and performance of outwardly focused sentimental response. This transition

will help to elucidate *Frankenstein*'s Gothic complication and distortion of cultural values, such as, in this case, sentimentalism.

In asserting that *Frankenstein*'s treatment of sentimentalism is Gothic, I draw on several theoretical discussions about the sentimental, the Gothic, and the relationship between these literary trends. Peter de Voogd, for example, defines sentimentalism as a cultural value rooted in the eighteenth-century pushback against the philosophies of Hobbes and Mandeville, who saw egoism and self-interest as the primary driving forces of humankind. De Voogd writes that "more 'optimistic' theories were developed which presented … man as 'good' by nature" and emphasized qualities like "sympathy … and its near-synonymous partner, benevolence" that people could develop by using "an intuitive Moral Sense" to distinguish between good and evil (77). Hence, sentimentalism foregrounds intense, emotional experiences of sympathy while also attaching an ethical significance to these emotions as the ability to look outside the self and be moved to tears (by a piece of art, another person, a circumstance, etc.), thus making it a characteristic that displays and fosters an individual's morality. As Hannah Doherty Hudson puts it, "sympathetic and morally improving tears" are a hallmark of sentimentalism (155).

Furthermore, Mary K. Patterson Thornburg specifies that eighteenth-century society often considered sentimental emotions to be desirable as opposed to other kinds of experiences (like violence, the unconscious, fear of the supernatural, etc.) that were deemed unacceptable (2). Thornburg asserts that these rejected experiences form the Gothic, which is "the distorted mirror image of the sentimental, reflecting, threatening, and to an extent mocking the conventions of sentimentality" (2) as well as "introducing apparent irrationalities and contradictions within the sentimental tradition" (22). One contradiction that will figure in my own argument is the possibility that sympathetic, sentimental emotions also contain an element of self-interest as the

sentimentalist's intense feelings become a source of personal enjoyment or self-absorption, experiences that would align with the philosophies of self-centeredness that sentimentalism allegedly resists. This prospect creates a contradicting sense of sentimentalism as both a selfless and self-centered experience and troubles any notion that sentimental tears have straightforward ethical implications. So, while both the Gothic and the sentimental rely on extreme emotionality, the Gothic highlights emotions that sentimentalism tries to reject, destabilizing the idea that the sentimental tradition and its moral code form a complete and harmonious view of reality. Thornburg explains, "Where the sentimental seeks to reassure us … that right and wrong are easily distinguishable, that conformity to its code of moral and social behavior will be rewarded, the Gothic refutes such assurance" (42). Each cultural trend opposes and shapes the other as sentimental texts attempt to suppress Gothic elements and Gothic texts question sentimental ideals.

However, my decision to use the term "Gothic" in my description of *Frankenstein*'s structure does not merely treat the Gothic as a critique of and an opposite to the sentimental, but rather harnesses an important characteristic of the Gothic that these discussions reveal: its ability to distort and complicate. Jerrold Hogle writes that the Gothic is often "concerned with the interpenetration of … opposed conditions—including life/death, natural/supernatural, ancient/modern, realistic/artificial, and conscious/unconscious" (9). My use of the term "Gothic," then, refers to the distortion that happens when such interpenetration between opposing concepts occurs. Instead of using the Gothic as a tool to criticize the sentimental, my goal here is to tap into the Gothic's potential to highlight contradictions and complexities within sentimentalism, particularly the conflict between conceptions of sentimentalism as a selfless or self-centered experience. One means through which this complication of sentimentalism occurs is *Frankenstein*'s epistolarity, which, as stated above, harkens back to Goethe's use of epistolarity in

The Sorrows of Young Werther to demonstrate the evolving ties between literary forms and cultural values.

Shelley's indebtedness to *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is evidenced by the fact that she blatantly calls this text to readers' attention when her Creature reads the work and emotionally reacts to protagonist Werther's love, despair, and suicide. Roswitha Burwick has connected this literary reference with Shelley's mother, feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft, whose love letters to American speculator Gilbert Imlay form part of a compilation that Shelley's father, William Godwin, published after Wollstonecraft's death. Burwick notes that "the themes of unrequited love, suffering, suicide, and repeated allusions to Goethe [in Godwin's preface] … suggest that [Godwin] was fictionalizing [Wollstonecraft] into the figure of a 'female Werter,'" a parallel that may, in turn, suggest that *Frankenstein*'s literary allusion has feminist undertones (48). Additionally, Robyn Schiffman identifies the reference with contemporary critiques of Goethe as the Creature "signals what some detractors focused on when judging Goethe an apologist for suicide" ("Concert" 215). Indulging in heightened emotions, the Creature "avoids condemning the suicidal act" (215). Such interpretations of the allusion emphasize the intense emotional experiences constitutive of sentimentalism since, after all, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is a quintessential work in the sentimental genre.

This reference also allows *Frankenstein* to define sentimentalism when the Creature expresses admiration for Werther's "lofty sentiments and feelings, which had for their object something out of self" (142), a description that casts sentimentalism as an experience of strong emotions prompted by an external stimulus. The definition's emphasis on the sentimentalist's focus being outside the self aligns with the pushback against egoism and self-centeredness that De Voogd claims is a contributor to sentimental ideals; nevertheless, the Creature goes on to state,

"As I read … I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike the beings concerning whom I read" (142). This claim deems the Creature's sentimental reaction to Werther a self-centered experience since the Creature tries to relate Werther's situation to his own. Luis Rosa even suggests that the Creature typifies a model of reading in which one "can no longer identify an interior self and an exterior world" as distinctions between self and other become blurred (477). *Frankenstein*, therefore, features multiple, conflicting portrayals of sentimentalism in this passage so that the focus of the sentimentalist's emotional energies within the dynamic between self and stimulus takes the foreground while the ethical implications of such intense feelings are vague. Compared to the contemporary preoccupation with the ethics surrounding sentimentalism, *Frankenstein* lays more emphasis on the complexities within the sentimentalist-stimulus relationship than on clearly labelling sentimental emotions as moral or immoral. In order to understand how *Frankenstein* complicates the dynamics between the sentimentalist and stimulus in a Gothic way, one can consider how the formal qualities of both *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Frankenstein* direct readers' and characters' attention and, by consequence, their emotions.

For instance, in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Werther's feelings are closely tied to the work's epistolarity. Novels written in the epistolary form tend to be what H. Porter Abbott terms "nonretrospective," meaning that "the narrators are as yet uneducated by the experiences they relate" because "they do not know how their story will end until they have finished recording it" (23). Since these narrators cannot access knowledge outside of their own experiences, Abbott describes them as "cloistered" and claims that a cloistered narrator like Werther "allows the author to intensify … concentration on the central figure's private drama of self-awareness" (23). Indeed, Schiffman notes that the novel's epistolary communication is largely one-sided so that "there is

literally no topos for a post office or little concern at all for the mechanics of exchange and writing" as Werther's interiority takes precedence over these material concerns ("*Werther*" 422). Thus, the novel's letters are noteworthy for their foregrounding of Werther and his emotions. The novel's form further augments this emphasis by using a frame that situates Werther's letters, and the passionate expressions they contain, as the focus of readers' sentimental energies. The fictional editor, who has collected and organized Werther's writings, introduces the story by telling readers, "You cannot deny your admiration and love for [Werther's] spirit and character, nor your tears at his fate" (23). Werther's letters, then, are the focus of the narrative while the frame sets up the sentimental reaction to this content.

Unlike the editor, who devotes his attention to the object of his sentimentalism, Werther concentrates on his own emotions, the letters becoming the means through which he does so. Abbott notes this trend when he writes that Werther uses the letters to become the "constant advocate of his feelings of the moment" (31). Likewise, Maureen Harkin characterizes Werther as one of many sentimental protagonists who are "concern[ed] with their own responses, the state of their own hearts," rather than with the external stimulus that triggers the sentimental reaction (123). Readers can most clearly see Werther's tendency to foreground his own emotional experiences when he describes his interactions with Lotte, the woman with whom he is in love. Writing to his friend Wilhelm, Werther states, "There is a melody, a simple but moving air, which she plays on the piano … the moment she plays the first note I feel delivered of all my pain, confusion and brooding fancies … The darkness and madness of my soul are dispelled, and I breathe more freely again" (53). Though Lotte and the tune she is playing initiate Werther's sentimental response, his letters are centered around his feelings, implying that he is the focus of his own attention. In this way, the novel's epistolarity is a means of expressing interior emotions, and the narrative structure

portrays sentimentalism as primarily concerned with the sentimental protagonist, who is the object of both the narrative's and his own interest.

This emphasis on the self is an aspect of sentimentalism that troubles the ideals of sympathy and benevolence that De Voogd explains. While such ideals imply that a sentimental response is an admirable mark of virtue, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* also shows that over-indulging in emotions may result in self-destruction. Eric Parisot explores such interpretations of sentimentalism by examining suicide notes that were published in the eighteenth-century British press, and he points out some significant qualities that many of these documents share. For example, the authors of suicide notes often portrayed themselves as victims who were "subject to [an] inherently fragile constitution—an affliction beyond [their] control or design—and vulnerable to misfortunes acted upon [them] rather than liable for any misconduct acted by [them]" (287). Werther's suicide letter to Lotte also exhibits this sort of victimization as he explains the cause of his misery: "Once I was absent once more, and saw [your husband] at your side, I was disheartened … and fell prey to feverish doubts" (127). Such language gives the impression that Werther cannot control his emotions or his fate, his sentimentalism overtaking him and exacerbating his self-absorption so that he takes his own life. As the means through which Werther can articulate and conceptualize these dominating emotions, his letters ultimately further his focus on his own helplessness and confirm a view of sentimentalism as a dangerous experience.

Besides bringing his own interiority to the forefront, Werther's letters also elicit readers' sentimental emotions, just like the published suicide notes that Parisot analyzes. Parisot observes that published suicide notes offered "opportunities for [readers] to test their own capacity to feel and … privileg[ed] the sentimental pleasures of sensibility over its fatal possibilities" (279). In other words, when readers read a suicide note, their focus is turned away from the actual plight of

the writer and towards their own elevated emotions, which become evidence of virtue and can even be an enjoyable experience. Werther's suicide note is no exception as it urges Lotte, readers, and all of "Nature" to "mourn … for your son and friend and lover is nearing his end" (126). The audience's reactions constitute an essential part of the letter's function. Though some contemporary readers saw this sort of mourning as an idealistic sign of virtue, others criticized the lack of social action that resulted, believing that the trend "cut the sentimentalist off from actually *doing* anything about the deplorable situations" described in the suicide notes (Harkin 123). By contrast, Maureen Harkin suggests that action is not the goal of sentimentalism, but rather that the genre presents "non-action for its own sake" (127). In fact, Werther's helplessness and readers' inability to alleviate his suffering are precisely the conditions that allow the novel to elicit such intense emotions and become a sentimental text. Regardless of whether sentimentalism is dangerous, edifying, or unproductive, though, the use of letters in this work simultaneously emphasizes the protagonist's self-absorbed interiority and the readers' own emotional reactions, showing that the epistolary form here tends to prioritize the sentimentalist's role in sentimental interactions.

Conversely, Shelley complicates *Frankenstein*'s epistolarity by altering its structure and function, and this artistic move sets up and distorts opposing portrayals of sentimentalism to create an interpenetrating binary. As stated earlier, such binaries are much like the Gothic relationships that Jerrold Hogle describes: "[The Gothic] is … concerned with the interpenetration of . . . opposed conditions—including life/death, natural/supernatural, ancient/modern, realistic/artificial, and conscious/unconscious" (9). These sorts of interpenetration suggest that a concept on one side of a binary could appear within or in tandem with its counterpart so that, while the concepts are still opposites, distinctions between them become more complex. Another

example of how interpenetration may work is evident in Jonathan Crimmins's analysis of *Frankenstein*, which situates sentimentalism in relation to another literary and cultural trend of the era, romanticism.

In his article, Crimmins identifies the romantic and the sentimental as aspects of the Gothic that are concerned with questions about individual consciousness. He traces these mindsets back to scholars such as Priestley, Lacan, and Godwin to conclude that romanticism tends to treat individual consciousness as the product of material and psychological influences while sentimentalism emphasizes how sociocultural and ideological factors affect the individual. This identification of sentimentalism with sociocultural influences here agrees with the definitions of sentimentalism that I have already highlighted since forming emotional connections with others would ideally cause individuals to conceive of themselves as part of a larger community. In the context of *Frankenstein*, Crimmins's analysis deems the Creature the symbol of the romantic because his isolation during his formative days compels him to learn about life and himself through "investigation of the material world" so that his "judgments [are] the result of sensation" (Crimmins 570). The Creature's creator, Victor, on the other hand, "orients his narrative ideologically and grounds it in the domestic" because he recognizes that social forces have shaped his selfhood (573). This difference between the romantic and sentimental "vectors" prompts both the Creature's and Victor's unsuccessful attempts to "master the principles of the opposing vector" since each vector "feels the influence of what it cannot acknowledge" (569). In the end, Crimmins claims that "[m]aterialist principles cross ideological boundaries, and ideological principles cross material borders," but each vector still "undermines the status of the other" because the novel presents no effective "mediation" or middle ground between them (579-80).

This Gothic interpenetration of binary concepts applies not only to the distinction between romanticism and sentimentalism that Crimmins articulates, but also to the various functions of sentimentalism itself. The distortion that interpenetration can create is evident in *Frankenstein*'s multi-level, epistolary structure, which creates what Criscilla Benford describes as "the inassimilable" (336). Benford explains that the inassimilable is any element of a text, such as a character or a narrative technique, that "calls attention to the incompatibility of two or more social sense-making frames" (336). Since the inassimilable brings multiple "sense-making frames" or ways of thinking into conflict with one another, I assert that it can also juxtapose the two opposing functions of sentimentalism as both a selfless and self-centered practice (336). Therefore, in order to understand how the inassimilable reveals the dualities of sentimentalism in this text, readers must examine how Shelley uses the epistolary form to complicate the portrayal of sentimentalism that Goethe's epistolarity affords.

Sentimentalism in *Frankenstein* retains many of the functions that it exhibits in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, but it also entails a turning outward from the self that Werther's letters do not illustrate, moving beyond the sentimentalist's interiority to foreground the stimulus to which the sentimentalist responds. This shift in, or addition to, the earlier epistolary depiction of sentimentalism is apparent in the fact that *Frankenstein*'s epistolarity is moved to the periphery of the narrative structure. The letters form the frame while the uninterrupted, first-person style characterizes inner narrative levels. Robert Walton, the author of the framing letters written to his sister, begins the story by relating his preparations for an exploratory mission into the Arctic as well as his "half pleasurable and half fearful" emotions and his lonely longing for a friend (56). Like Werther, Walton initially uses his letters to communicate his own emotional state, yet, upon meeting the haggard Victor Frankenstein alone in the Arctic, Walton's attention turns away from

himself and towards Victor. Walton observes, "I never saw a more interesting creature: his eyes have generally an expression of wildness … but there are moments when . . . his whole countenance is lighted up … with a beam of benevolence" (59). Victor is here functioning as the external stimulus that prompts Walton to react with feeling, and the narrator's focus on Victor rather than himself forwards a view of sentimentalism that emphasizes the object of the sentimentalist's emotions.

In showing outwardly focused sentimentalism, Walton mimics the fictional editor from *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by using the frame to set up the emotional response to Victor's story, which becomes the focal point of the narrative: "I [feel] the greatest eagerness to hear [Victor's] promised narrative, partly from curiosity, and partly from a strong desire to ameliorate his fate" (62). Since this outer frame is composed of letters, the novel's epistolarity becomes the means of performing outwardly focused sentimental response, so much so that the epistolary form subsides to make room for the first-person narrative to which it is reacting. Jeanne Britton recognizes this transition's emotional import by stating, "*Frankenstein* offers a version of sympathy that is constituted by the production and transmission of narrative as compensation for the failures of face-to-face sympathetic experience" (3). In other words, Britton sees Walton's desire to write Victor's story as a desire to exercise sympathy, and Shelley's replacing of Walton's epistolarity with Victor's first-person narrative demonstrates the sentimentalist's turning away from the self to forge an emotional bond with the object of his sentimentalism.

Britton's usage of the term "sympathy" should not be confused with sentimentalism, though, because the two concepts have some key differences that alter the implications of the novel's structure. According to Britton, sympathy in Romantic-era Europe was "a phenomenon in which one element comes to resemble another … [through] imaginative shifts in perspective" (6).

The receding of the novel's epistolarity to present Victor's narrative clearly models the sympathetic process as Walton takes on Victor's perspective in order to identify with him. Yet, Britton also asserts that this sympathy fails because Walton does not heed Victor's injunction to kill the Creature at the end of the story, an act that would allow Walton's sympathy to play out in the material world. Britton claims that as Victor's "narrative level conclude[s], and the [epistolary] level resumes … a lack of sympathy is expressed" through Walton's inaction, deeming sympathy a practice contingent on material action performed by the sympathizer (15).

However, as readers have seen in Harkin's analysis of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, sentimentalism is not defined by action, but rather by inaction since the inability of the reader to intervene in the unfolding tragedy heightens the intensity of that reader's sentimental emotions. Such a concern with inaction is also evident in Cassandra Falke's examination of "the dual position that the reader [of *Frankenstein*] … occupies as judge and confidant" since the reader is simultaneously a third party who observes the events that the letters chronicle and an addressee who receives Walton's letters (61). Falke argues that readers' third-party position implies that "[t]here is no way for [them] to affect the characters or situations [they] read about," much like the readers of suicide notes described above (63). Though Falke does not connect such inaction to issues of sentimentalism, the reader's role as a confidant who can practice "empathy and non-judgmental reception" suggests that the judge and confidant roles could be interdependent, with the third-party observer's inability to act perhaps exacerbating the empathetic impulses of the confidant (61). Rather than signaling Walton's failure to perform empathetic action, then, *Frankenstein*'s resuming of epistolarity has a much more practical explanation in terms of sentimentalism: Victor's narrative, the object of Walton's sentimentalism, has ended.

Because Victor has finished telling his story, the external stimulus that triggers Walton's sentimental reaction is removed, and Walton's outwardly focused sentimentalism ends, causing him to return to his own narrative format. He does not fulfill his initial desire to "ameliorate [Victor's] fate" (62), but this lack of action does not bar Walton from sentimentalism since, as in the case of Werther and the readers of published suicide notes, the impossibility of productive action contributes to the intense feelings that characterize sentimentalism. Granted, Walton does have the option to obey Victor's final request, but such an action would undermine Walton's sentimentalism since, when meeting the Creature at the end of the novel, Walton has a sentimental reaction to him as well. Walton describes, "My first impulses, which had suggested to me the duty of obeying the dying request of [Victor], in destroying his enemy, were now suspended by a mixture of curiosity and compassion" (217). Walton cannot answer Victor's call for action because to do so would be to bring harm to another object of sentimentalism. Since Walton has conflicting impulses in this moment, productive action is not possible, and Victor's, the Creature's, and Walton's own helplessness solidify Walton's sentimental emotions. So, while Britton's reading of sympathy in *Frankenstein* hinges on the completion of material action, inaction is the driving force behind sentimentalism as the framed, epistolary form of the novel encapsulates an outwardly focused sentimentalism in a way that Goethe's earlier epistolarity does not.

Nevertheless, to regard sentimentalism as solely centered on an external stimulus is to neglect *Frankenstein*'s propensity to distort binary concepts. In order to understand how the novel distorts conceptions of inwardly and outwardly trained sentimentalism, one can turn to Benford's notion of "inassimilable" narrative features that contrast multiple "social sense-making frames" or, in this case, varying conceptions of sentimentalism (336). By bringing these two forms of sentimentalism together to highlight the conflicts between them, the inassimilable elements of

Frankenstein also place the two types of sentimentalism in conversation with each other so that they form an interpenetrating binary. In this way, *Frankentstein*'s multi-level, epistolary structure can formally encapsulate both forms of sentimentalism as they conflict with and complicate each other. Granted, Goethe's text allows readers to observe more than one type of sentimentalism as well, given that Werther's self-absorption is balanced by the fictional editor, whose self-effacement makes way for the protagonist's narrative. Yet, Werther's letters do not perform such a turning outward as they can only be their own narrative, not contain another character's narrative level. This aspect of the letters prevents the epistolarity of Goethe's novel from engaging in the externally centered sentimentalism that its non-epistolary frame exhibits.

Likewise, the frame of Goethe's text does not communicate the kind of interiority with which Walton's letters begin. The editor instead remains entirely focused on Werther, noting, "I wish very much that we had enough of our friend's own testimony, concerning the last remarkable days of his life, to render it unnecessary for me to interrupt this series of preserved letters with narration" (106). This language not only maintains the self-effacing function of the frame, but also obscures the identity of the editor. Burwick reads the editor figure as Werther's friend Wilhelm, who, as the addressee of Werther's letters, would presumably possess and organize them for readers to read. Burwick writes, "Werther's friend Wilhelm appeals in his preface to the admiration, love and compassion of his readers" (48), emphasizing the heightened emotions of sentimentalism. However, the identity of the self-effacing editor is never patent in this novel, and readers cannot definitively label the editor as Wilhelm since the singular editor is often pluralized, the "I" transitioning into a "we" frequently throughout the outer frame (106). Rather than grappling with the identity of the editor figure, then, the frame is concerned with an outwardly focused sentimentalism while the inner letters primarily exhibit a self-absorbed sentimentalism. Both forms

of sentimentalism are present in the text, but they are restricted to their respective portions of the narrative structure.

By contrast, Shelley positions the epistolary form in the outer frame rather than in the inner narrative levels and, thereby, endows epistolarity with the ability to express Walton's interiority *and* facilitate externally focused sentimental response. This inassimilable feature brings the two forms of sentimentalism together to foreground the conflict between them as well as their capacity to interpenetrate. The dual function of Walton's letters is evident when he returns to the epistolary form at the end of the novel. Once Walton finishes his outward response to Victor's story, another stimulus, Victor's death, soon initiates another sentimental reaction. Rather than practicing an externally focused sentimentalism this time, Walton focuses on his own emotional state by writing to his sister, "What can I say that will enable you to understand the depths of my sorrow … My tears flow; my mind is overshadowed by a cloud of disappointment" (217). The letters, which formerly subsided to make way for Victor's narrative level, are now focused on Victor's death as an event that is significant for Walton. In other words, the letters can both contain other narratives and chronicle Walton's own story and emotions. As Jessica Hanssen states, "Walton's narrative is in the first person, with all of intimacy of the first-person confessional, [but] it also achieves a sense of third-person omnipresence" as his letters assume a duality that Goethe's epistolarity does not (102). Such duality in Walton's letters obscures definitive formal distinctions between the two manifestations of sentimentalism, highlighting how the two concepts simultaneously compete and interpenetrate to form the sort of Gothic binaries discussed earlier. Of course, each form of sentimentalism conflicts with the other because they represent the opposing philosophies of selflessness and self-interest, and since the novel never blends selfless and self-centered experiences into one coherent view of sentimentalism that has clear ethical implications, the

concepts remain distinct and opposed. However, their coexistence and distortion within the framing letters still suggests that neither can fully encapsulate sentimentalism on its own or exist in entire isolation from the possibility of the other, so the two forms of sentimentalism become an interpenetrating binary in which distinctions between opposing concepts are complicated.

Moreover, beyond Walton's framing letters, some of the narratives that his letters contain are in letter form themselves, and the presence of these letters is another inassimilable narrative feature that contrasts and distorts the two forms of sentimentalism. These letters are embedded in Victor's narrative level because they contain key information that moves his story along. His first letter from his future wife, Elizabeth, for example, relates the story of the servant Justine while his father writes a letter to explain the circumstances surrounding the death of Victor's younger brother William. The facts contained in these letters just so happen to be of use when readers discover that Justine is convicted for William's death, but besides bringing relevant information to readers' attention, these letters also interrupt Victor's continuous narrative with epistolarity. As Victor focuses his attention on the letters, the external stimuli to which he is sentimentally responding, his narrative effaces itself to make way for the object of his sentimentalism, much like the editor's frame in Goethe's novel. The epistolarity within Victor's narrative level is quite brief, yet it still harkens back to the older model of epistolarity that *The Sorrows of Young Werther* uses, mimicking and manipulating Goethe's portrayal of sentimentalism as a result.

Readers will remember that Goethe's use of a non-epistolary frame casts sentimentalism as an outwardly focused response while the inner epistolarity works to underscore Werther's self-centered emotional experiences. Though Victor's narrative level does follow the trend of embedding epistolarity within a non-epistolary frame, the implications that this format creates differ significantly in Shelley's text. First of all, the self-effacement of Victor's non-epistolary

narrative is counteracted by his intense emotional reactions after reading these letters, reactions that render him, like Werther, a narrator who indulges "the full and immediate expression of [his] feelings of the moment" (Abbott 29). Upon learning of William's death, for instance, Victor "[can] hardly sustain the multitude of feelings that crow[d] into [his] mind" (Shelley 97). Similarly, Elizabeth's second letter, in which she relieves him from the obligation of marrying her, causes him to contemplate his anticipated death at the hands of the Creature even as "some softened feelings [steal] into [his] heart" (192). Such a focus on Victor's interiority undermines the formal suggestion of externally centered sentimentalism and distorts the cultural value, complicating the relationship between this social ideal and the novel's form.

Another inassimilable element in *Frankenstein* that brings up tensions between the two forms of sentimentalism is Safie's narrative, which is neither entirely epistolary nor entirely non-epistolary and, therefore, distorts sentimentalism even further. The ambiguity of this narrative's form results from the story of its creation. Safie is an Arabian woman whose father is rescued from prison by the Frenchman Felix De Lacey, and, as a result, Safie and Felix become engaged. Safie does not speak French, so she enlists "the aid of an old man … who underst[ands] French" to write letters to Felix on her behalf, so she can "express her thoughts in the language of her lover" (138). Through a series of tragic circumstances, the lovers are separated, so Felix must long for his betrothed as he lives in exile with the rest of the De Lacey family, whom the Creature is observing from afar, until Safie finally locates and joins the family. Safie's letters to Felix are, therefore, present in the De Lacey household, and the Creature creates copies so that he can fully understand Safie's and Felix's history. The exact content of these letters is difficult to discern since they do not appear in their original form in the novel. Rather, the Creature summarizes them within his own narrative level and tells Victor, "Before I depart, I will give [my copies] to you, they will

prove the truth of my tale" (138). Safie's letters here draw on the Gothic trope of the found manuscript[6] in which the discovery of a document lends a story veracity. Tomasz Sawczuk notes that this trope is central to the novel as Walton's letters collectively become a "textual artifact" that positions itself as real to the readers' world to create a sense of authenticity while Walton "endors[es] other documents presented to him by Victor," like Safie's letters (227). Though Safie's narrative functions as a corroborating document, her story has a variety of manifestations: the letters that she dictates, the Creature's copies, and the Creature's summary within his narrative level. The epistolary document that is so crucial to the story's alleged credibility is absent from the narrative structure, and this inassimilable narrative feature once again highlights conflicts between the two forms of sentimentalism in a way that distorts the cultural value.

In terms of the letters that Safie dictates, readers cannot discern whether her emotions are trained on Felix or herself as she "thank[s] [Felix] in the most ardent terms … [and] gently deplore[s] her own fate" of being trapped in a harem (138). The formal absence of the letters prevents a modelling of sentimentalism through Safie's language, so the characterization of the cultural value in the original letters remains vague. On the other hand, the Creature's transcribing of the letters signals the desire to sympathize that Britton's analysis of *Frankenstein* emphasizes. The copied version models the Creature's turning his attention away from himself to recreate the letters in their original form, just like Walton's adoption of Victor's non-epistolary style shows an outwardly focused sentimental response. So, the Creature here performs self-effacing or outwardly trained sentimentalism, yet his copies are not present in the narrative structure, preventing this

[6] One notable example of this trope includes the framing device in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), in which an editor claims to have discovered a manuscript that contains the succeeding story. Although this editor does not present the story itself as nonfiction, the notion that the manuscript is a work by a historical writer creates the illusion that the story and the language are authentic samples of fiction from an earlier time. In fact, such found document tropes so are prevalent throughout Gothic literature that Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), a work that satirizes the Gothic, incorporates a humorous scene in which the protagonist discovers a manuscript that she hopes will contain a dramatic story, but actually contains nothing more than washing bills.

externally centered sentimentalism from formally impacting the novel. The Creature instead narrates Safie's narrative himself, and this choice foregrounds his own voice rather than prompting the self-erasure that the epistolary form of Safie's story would allow. The simultaneously epistolary and non-epistolary nature of Safie's narrative, therefore, draws attention to the varying relationships between sentimentalists and the stimuli to which these sentimentalists react, complicating depictions of sentimentalism in the process.

The complexity of sentimentalism is even more evident when readers consider whether sentimentalism in this novel is functioning as a sign of virtue or as an invitation for destructive behavior. In the case of Safie's story, Joyce Zonana reads the female character's narrative "silence," or the absence of the actual letters, as a rhetorical move on Shelley's part since "silence enacts women's resistance to acts of appropriation," such as the reading or writing of someone else's narrative (180). Zonana, then, sees the Creature's copied letters as possessive rather than as evidence of an externally focused sentimentalism, and had the epistolary form of this narrative been included in the novel, epistolarity could have become a vehicle for readers to exploit Safie's story as an exercise for their own sentimental capacities. Thus, Zonana implies that sentimentalism could be a destructive practice in this instance.

Furthermore, the damaging possibilities of sentimental interactions are augmented by Victor's death and the Creature's anticipated death, with each character experiencing heightened emotions to the point of mental breakdown, which wears down Victor's health and drives the Creature to vow suicide. The novel's tragic ending is reminiscent of Werther's death as the protagonists fall victim to their own miseries, but Shelley presents an alternative to this fate that Goethe's text does not. Though Victor and the Creature are driven to their own destruction, Walton has been able to hear their stories and has the capacity to learn from their experiences. Unlike the

"cloistered" Werther, who "shores up his identity against alteration or growth," as well as the anonymous fictional editor, whose lack of self-expression keeps him from having a character arc, Walton can use Victor's and the Creature's narratives to assess his own virtue and become aware of the pitfalls that trapped his fellow characters (Abbott 31). The novel's peripheral epistolarity puts Walton in a position to use his sentimental responses to foster his own virtue if he so chooses, so sentimentalism has the potential to become an edifying practice for him. Zonana, by contrast, might see such sentimentalism as proof that the cultural ideal can benefit the sentimentalist, but not the object of the sentimental response, while Harkin's insistence on sentimental inaction "shelve[s] old questions about whether … sentiment encourages or discourages the solving of … problems by showing that the relationship of feeling to acting is such a tenuous one" (135). These and many other interpretations of sentimentalism's ethics are all applicable to *Frankenstein*, and the point here is that the Gothic novel's use of epistolarity encourages such multiform depictions of and views on sentimentalism.

Therefore, Shelley's appropriation and manipulation of epistolary structures underscores the evolving relationships between literary forms and cultural values in *Frankenstein*. The text certainly draws on the formal and thematic qualities of Goethe's previous work, but by relegating the epistolary form to the outer frame, Shelley's novel allows the letters to model both externally and inwardly focused sentimentalism in a way that complicates the epistolary function modelled by Goethe's work. *Frankenstein*'s experimentation with narrative structure not only makes the text a prime site for analyzing the interpretive possibilities that epistolarity affords, but it also provides insight into the Gothic's capacity to distort social ideals like sentimentalism. Hence, the intersections between epistolarity and sentimentalism contribute to the novel's notorious

elusiveness, providing yet another reason why literary critics keep coming back to this text centuries after its inception.

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