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### Searching for Understanding: How Hamlet and Frankenstein Inform Humanity's Response to Trauma

Jonathan Knippenberg  
*Taylor University*

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Jonathan Knippenberg

Dr. Carie King

ENG 492

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Searching for Understanding:

How *Hamlet* and *Frankenstein* Inform Humanity's Response to Trauma

*CRACK is the sound I heard as the players collided on the field. The velocity of the tackle echoed, no, shouted the severity of the game—rivals competing for a homecoming victory. However, the weight of this game was no match for the gravity of the exclamation by the eighth grader next to me. “MY MOM BEATS ME” was followed by a vivacious laugh to downplay the heaviness of what had just escaped from her mouth. It sounded like she was joking, but I don’t think she fully understood what had happened and what was happening to her. I awkwardly fumbled for a response (You would think as a teacher I would be better at interacting with kids). “Um, what?” I managed to stutter. “Sometime when my momma get mad at me, she sit on top of me and just start swingin...” came the response. This came just as loud as the first exclamation accompanied by another deflective burst of laughter. Wow. Could this be any more of an uncomfortable situation? At THIRTEEN she has already had this incomprehensible experience. I could tell she wanted to tell somebody but had to make it sound low-key in a cool eighth grader kind of way. What do you say to that?*

Life is often unpredictable, taking people by surprise. When events transpire too quickly and too violently, the brain frequently does not have the capacity or time to process the situation.

Cathy Caruth talks of trauma in *Unclaimed Experience* as “an event that . . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known” (qtd. in Mellon 116). In order to find comprehension for what cannot be fully known, humans must share their experiences in some manner. Thus, much literature either responds to trauma or depicts it. Both William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* are texts which express encounters with trauma, yet the main characters in each story grapple with it in different ways. Kevin Griffith, in his poem “Hamlet Meets Frankenstein,” poignantly captures this idea in *Hamlet* and *Frankenstein* as the characters wrestle with trauma and how their need for expression affects the works in their entirety:

For Frankenstein, of course, Hamlet's central  
 problem is irrelevant. The monster  
 offs the king in the first act,  
 dispatches Polonius quickly with a twist  
 of the neck, and then terrorizes the kingdom  
 until he ascends to the throne,  
 a feared leader, making the phrase  
 "There's something rotten in Denmark"  
 his badge of honor, an official seal.  
 Ophelia is fished from the river,  
 brought back to life with a bolt of lightning  
 and made his bride, a fitting queen.

Meanwhile, Hamlet is still sulking  
 at the grave site, skull in hand

and three dead kings to contend with,  
 one still very much in charge.

Remarkably, the play ends like all tragedies:

The dead watch over the living,

and the living wonder why it's so hard to be alive. (137)

The poem focuses largely on comparing Frankenstein's monster's response to trauma to Hamlet's. The monster responds to trauma with bloody ambition. Griffith seems to attribute admirability to the monster while Hamlet, morose to the point of dressing in black, responds in a depressed manner as opposed to mimicking the monster's violence. Hamlet is singular, on his own, producing his own trauma (which has effects on others), whereas Frankenstein and the creature are bound together, traumatized by and traumatizing each other. It may appear that such a focus on traumatic experiences in novels and plays can lean towards bleak, depressing reading. Yet, humankind delights in seeing the suffering of others. It is comforting for one to discover other individuals dealing with similar struggles. Humans also find satisfaction in seeing the pain of others and knowing the pain outweighs their own. Therefore, "[i]f we are to abolish trauma, there will be no life and no art, in a way" (Mellon 123). Removing pain and trauma would consequently remove the comprehension of pain, both the pain of the characters and the reader's own pain. As a result of the trauma that accompanies the human experience, it seems one of the central goals of humanity and the human experience is to seek understanding: to comprehend and to be comprehended. Thus, *Hamlet* and *Frankenstein* offer an opportunity for readers to learn from the trauma of the characters and discover more about the nature of trauma.

*Trauma Defined*

An encounter with trauma or suffering is extremely common for all individuals throughout a lifetime. In fact, a lack of this would most likely be considered inhuman. There are two classifications of trauma: pathology and psychiatry. The former is “a body wound, or shock produced by sudden physical injury, as from violence or accident” and “the condition produced by this” (“Trauma” *Dictionary*). The latter is “an experience that produces psychological injury or pain” and, “the psychological injury so caused” (“Trauma” *Dictionary*). In a world rife with violence and accidents, it is apparent that part of the human experience is accepting trauma as commonplace. However, if humans do not accept this commonality, there is little possibility to find rest or a solution to their trauma.

While it is useful to understand the denotation of trauma by itself, it is also important to understand the term within the field where it is studied most often— psychology. Trauma, by nature, is inherently associated with the way one’s brain interprets the events of life. According to the American Psychological Association “trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea” (“Trauma” *American*). If not dealt with properly, the experiences of individuals bear the potential to permeate their lives and forever alter trust in others and one’s ability to be an effective citizen of one’s community. Sharing one’s experiences is done with courage that transcends the disengagement trauma often brings and the numbness it can induce in one’s life.

Literature is one of the classic modes of wrestling with trauma and many works can be labeled as having characteristics of trauma narratives. These are written by authors struggling to understand their own trauma or that of others. Christa Schönfelder notes that “the attempt to communicate that which resists ordinary processes of remembering and narrating, of representation and comprehension” (30) is what perpetuates trauma narratives. She completes her thought saying, “Trauma narratives raise important questions about the possibility of verbalizing the unspeakable, narrating the unnarratable, and making sense of the incomprehensible” (30). Not only are individuals seeking to burst from isolation but also to name the elusive inner struggles. Many works in literature deal with suffering as “trauma has become a prominent topos in life writing and fiction” (Schönfelder 28).

Additionally, to better understand approaching a trauma narrative, or trauma in general, one must comprehend that “repetition compulsion is one of *the* determining features of trauma” further bringing to light its apparent cyclical nature (Schönfelder 32). If the trauma is not understood, then the individual will never learn healing or growth as they will remain in the aftermath of the trauma. What then can be done to break this repetition of trauma? According to Deborah Horvitz, when “stories of the past are consciously recognized, the cycle of violence can end, because the narratives...are repeated and passed on” (qtd. in Schönfelder 34). Recognizing and putting a name to the erratic, unhealthy path of trauma is, in fact, what can help the individual break from the cycle. Not only will the individual then overcome their own trauma through conscious recognition but they will then be able to assist others in avoiding the same struggle. Once readers understand these ideas, they apply what is learned in reading to life outside the pages. Even more so, readers may then be able to assist those around them stuck in

trauma. In this instance, literature transcends mere storytelling and can teach each reader more about how their own trauma can be understood as well as that of their fellow humans.

In this in-depth look into the existing trauma in both *Hamlet* and *Frankenstein* it is important to understand that trauma narratives are more than stories; they are external responses to uninterpretable events.

### *Hamlet and Frankenstein: Trauma Narratives*

Many of the phenomena that occur in *Hamlet* qualify the work to fit in the category of trauma narrative. When it comes to trauma, it is crucial to consider that, as Lorna Mellon believes, “The wound or traumatic scar thus repeatedly calls out and requires the presence of an ‘other’ through which to be heard” (116). In examining *Hamlet*, it will become evident where Hamlet ‘calls out to be heard’ and is not given this outlet. Thus, his trauma overcomes him, leading to the death of many characters at the end of the play.

Hamlet has endured an incredibly traumatic experience in losing his father. This occurrence sends the prince into a downward spiral beginning the cycle of his five-act struggle. Furthermore, promptly in the beginning of the play, he encounters the ghost of his father. The reader experiences the opening scene of the play in which Horatio tells Hamlet (in regard to his father), “My lord, I think I saw him yesternight” (1.2.194). In literary works, a ghost typically acts as a bad omen. The ghostly father commands Hamlet to “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” (1.5.29) imploring him on the grounds of, “If thou has nature in thee, bear it not” (1.5.86) the “it” in this quote being the murder of King Hamlet as well as the defiling of the throne. Not only has Hamlet seen his father’s ghost, but he also has been commanded to kill his uncle. This is the next point in the circle of Hamlet’s trauma. He doesn’t share his testimony and has his mind set to take revenge on the new king. To make matters worse, Hamlet’s mother (the

dead King's widow) marries his uncle after King Hamlet has so recently passed. These two events compounded surely beg the audience to empathize with the troubled Hamlet despite the poor decisions Hamlet will make throughout the remainder of the play.

Interestingly enough, the ghost is the first entity in this play that exemplifies a compulsion similar to what Hamlet will eventually demonstrate—the ghost repeats its cycle of revenge that results from murder due to lacking a listening ear. It is noticeable that “ultimately the ghost will speak only to Hamlet and will continue to roam the castle's walls until his testimony is heard.... the ghost's testimony perpetuates, rather than eliminates, the trauma of past actions” (Mellon 118). This sets the tone for how the rest of the characters react to trauma. The reader sees many of the characters perpetuating their trauma instead of taking steps toward healing.

While the ghost is its own example of a traumatic cycle, Hamlet struggles with these occurrences and with how no one will listen to his plight. Mellon claims that “Hamlet needs to kill Claudius without becoming him—to confront his desires would essentially mean becoming the wound and source of the original trauma” (117). As the already conflicted prince wrestles with his ghostly charge, he must figure out how far is too far to go with his revenge course. If Hamlet cannot break from his cycle, there will be no respite from his trauma.

A reader can observe that Hamlet truly “grapples with the problem of ending the trauma of his father's murder through revenge, while he also tries to avoid falling into the same pattern of repeating Claudius's actions” (Mellon 119). Hamlet's story is a prime example of trauma's cyclical nature. An individual stuck in trauma often finds it nearly impossible to escape without the help of someone outside of the situation. It seems the primary process to escape from trauma is to seek out others, share the trauma, and avoid ignoring and holding it at a distance. The



individual who is captive to their trauma often cannot see outside of their situation which is what keeps them stagnant in the healing process. When someone else is present and ready to listen, the traumatized individual can begin to break their cycle by naming the trauma and making someone else aware of it. Putting a face to trauma, violence, and evil allows them to be combatted.

Trauma can remain detrimental and elusive when the traumatized individual feels isolated.

Trauma stays victorious when it is ambiguous to everyone but the individual stuck in it. Hamlet searches to be heard and to find resolution yet fails.

Similarly, Victor Frankenstein and his monster are adversely affected by the repetition of trauma in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Victor begins life as a "typical" boy, even experiencing a tame childhood. In speaking with Robert Walton in Chapter 3, Frankenstein talks of an "exquisite pleasure in dwelling on the recollections of childhood..." which were not marred by misfortune that might cause trauma later in his life (Shelley 30). Upon reaching a college age, Frankenstein develops a certain "passion" that "afterwards ruled [his] destiny" (Shelley 31) separate from but accompanied by the passing of his beloved mother. If trauma is an event that is unable to be remembered normally, narrated, represented, or comprehended (Schönfelder 30), then certainly the death of one's mother along with the genesis of a monster (which follows in the next chapter) would serve as trauma for Victor Frankenstein. Not only does the poor doctor encounter trauma in these ways but so do the minor characters who unfortunately encounter the monster throughout the novel. Victor must endure the death of William, Justine, Clerval, and, lastly yet most importantly, his wife Elizabeth. He is even accused and jailed under the pretense of killing Henry (which Victor did inadvertently through creating the monster). However, looking at the experience of Frankenstein only tells one side of the story.

The monster, or demon, is born and almost immediately abandoned. This abandonment is something the monster wrestles with throughout the rest of the story and serves as his motive for inflicting pain and further trauma onto Victor. The monster says himself, “I remembered Adam’s supplication to his Creator. But where was mine? He had abandoned me, and in the bitterness of my heart I cursed him” (Shelley 118). While this narrative of anger and bitterness is at the surface of the monster’s conscience, readers see “his love for his maker is unrequited and seems incapable of making any impression upon Frankenstein” (Oates 546). This plays out throughout the entirety of the story in “the demon’s patient, unquestioning, utterly faithful, and utterly *human* love for his irresponsible creator” (Oates 545). The monster seeks time and time again to have his trauma validated by Victor in order to end it. The poor creature is stuck in this traumatic cycle, whether he is conscious of it or not, and will remain there for a lifetime as Victor clearly refuses to hear the monster.

The monster seems to call for the greatest reader sympathy by the end of the novel. Humans typically sympathize with or pity individuals who survive childhood and later life without any source of parental influence in their life. This is precisely the situation the monster lives in. Oates comments that “He is sired without a mother in defiance of nature, but he is in one sense an infant—a comically monstrous eight-foot baby—whose progenitor rejects him immediately after creating him” (546). Without a chance to develop or process through his trauma properly, the monster’s fixation on his creator continues, and the monster’s resentment is exponentially amplified. Therefore, the carnage increases dramatically as the story progresses and trauma for all parties remains unresolved. Trauma unrecognized or ignored becomes increasingly dangerous for the individual experiencing trauma and other parties near the individual.

*Trauma's Impact on Characters*

The echo of Mellon's idea of personifying trauma as demanding to be shared and heard through another individual remains pertinent in analyzing how Hamlet, Frankenstein, and the monster influence their communities. Humans have an innate need for connection with one another and without it life retains no meaning. When individuals internalize the intense emotional pain they carry or have experienced, they begin to destruct – a carnage of self.

In *Hamlet*, there is a visible shift towards this self-destructive behavior and readers observe this because he is entrapped in his constant struggle between revenge and reconciliation. His inner toil is amplified by the Ghost's appearance and demand for vengeance. In one of Hamlet's most famous soliloquies he contemplates "To be, or not to be, that is the question: / Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer" (3.1.63-64) certainly pondering whether this convoluted life is better than death itself. The troubled young man thinks out loud to himself many times in multiple soliloquies while treating others in a very passive aggressive manner. That is to say, Hamlet rarely addresses his true plight with those around him and resolves to treat other individuals poorly under the guise of his feigned madness. Under command of his father's ghost, Hamlet elects to seek revenge on Claudius. He must endure the heartbreak of Ophelia's forced rejection which results from his psychotic façade. It is difficult to discern the reliability of Hamlet's reaction, but the reader sees that he "Fell into a sadness, then into a fast, / Thence to a watch" (2.2.152-153) sinking into depression, an inability to eat, and an inability to sleep due to his apparent love for Ophelia. However, Hamlet later insults Ophelia in saying "Get thee to a nunnery!" (3.1.130). This is in direct contrast to the reader's impression of the love relationship

between the two. Hamlet loses his beloved through projecting his emotions and refraining from sharing his inner turmoil with his family and friends. He isolates himself.

Hamlet, in being trapped within his own mind, is a rather complicated character who further complicates himself as the play progresses. To satisfy the ghost's original demand for revenge, Hamlet elects to consciously disengage from the community. Heather Hirschfeld shows that Hamlet steers towards self-destruction via repressing his own trauma; repression is Hamlet's true fatal flaw. Hamlet, in repressing his trauma, unwittingly falls victim to repeating the anger reinforced by his father's ghost because "trauma insists on repetition rather than revision, a repetition that reinforces an earlier experience.... Hamlet is caught up in precisely this traumatic structure" (435). This repetition and repression easily finds Hamlet because he is self-isolated; he continually allows no one in the play to see his true self, only the mask of his antic disposition.

Hamlet is not the only character caught in self-isolation. Frankenstein leaves family and friends at the beginning of the novel to create the monster, and, when faced with the fallout for his decisions, he initially runs from his apartment and into the street not knowing where to go or what to do with himself. The monster first comes to life and Victor writes, "Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep" (Shelley 48) evidencing to the reader a great disturbance which impacts Victor in the form of sickness and madness. While battling this madness, Victor also begins to become numb to himself and those around him as he is effectively and irrevocably scarred by the sight of the monster. Victor acts this way because "[t]he form of the monster on whom [he] had bestowed existence was forever before [his] eyes" (Shelley 52). From now on, nothing will be the same for Victor or any other character in the novel. Clearly, the good doctor would prefer to run from his creation and never return.

As the creator never returns to his creation, the monster is left to survive on his own. His shocking birth and abandonment left him little opportunity to learn and develop as all newborn children deserve. The creature learns how humans use language through observing interactions between the DeLacey family members along with reading books found in Frankenstein's bag. The creature discovers that he was deprived of the love he observes between the DeLacey family members due to his progenitor's absence.

Both Frankenstein and the monster fail to address their issues. Yet, what happens to self when trauma that requires action and sharing is utterly ignored? Oates adds an explanation for Victor's reaction and for why he struggles immensely with his creation when she says "the demon is Frankenstein's deepest self" (551). Victor has not stumbled upon one monster, but two. The first monster was preexistent to the physical manifestation which causes Frankenstein great pain and trauma. The creature residing within Victor that has been in existence for far longer than he knew is brought to the surface in the process of making life from death. This internal manifestation regresses in a manner parallel to the physical monster; the monster learns quickly yet also regresses rapidly from benevolent and knowledge-seeking to malevolent and hungry for vengeance the longer he walks among creation.

Perhaps Victor's trauma is amplified by regret. It is not explicitly evident in the text, however, especially since Frankenstein is intentionally blind to the situation he created. Nathan Phillips (a high school teacher from Utah) shares insight from a discussion had in his class: "My students discussed how the novel would have turned out differently had Victor listened to his concerned family and not ignored them while he worked on creating the monster" (87). This sheds some light on a situation that seems like it would require regret on Victor's part. It is the withdrawal into self and denial of reality that causes Frankenstein's decline throughout the entire

novel. Multiple opportunities are offered to Frankenstein to unpack his experiences with his family and friends, yet he refuses them. In the beginning of the novel which is ironically the end for Victor, he describes his story and experiences to Robert Walton which releases him from the cycle of trauma and into death. Victor survives without allowing anyone close to him to know of the monster, including Henry Clerval who falls victim to the creature, until he shares the story with Walton, imploring him to finish the job of hunting the monster. This act of sharing not only allows Victor to pass peacefully, therefore ending the cycle of trauma and violence, but also puts an end to the monster's agony. The monster then vows to build and ascend his own funeral pile.

Running from problems is a natural reaction. The classic phenomenon of “fight or flight” is prevalent even here in *Frankenstein*. According to Joyce Carol Oates, Frankenstein acts irrationally and is blinded towards other characters in his decision of flight (not fight) from the creature he created. Oates says, “Frankenstein's behavior is preposterous, even idiotic, for he seems blind to the fact that is apparent to any reader—that he has loosed a fearful power into the world, whether it strikes his eye as aesthetically pleasing or not, and he must take responsibility for it” (546) which is clearly the last thing Victor wishes to do. Furthermore, “as he keeps telling himself, he is blameless of any wrongdoing apart from the act of creation itself. The emotions he catalogs for us -- gloom, sorrow, misery, despair -- are conventionally Romantic attitudes, mere luxuries in a context that requires action and not simply response” (Oates 546). Victor's diffusion of responsibility despite exhibiting emotions which call for action is something that will be present throughout the entire story. And throughout this story, Frankenstein's avoidant behavior further represses this intense trauma.

The “daemon” also runs in response to trauma, yet he runs towards his troubles, unlike his creator. The response the monster chooses impacts nearly every single character in

*Frankenstein*. What is intriguing is that the monster's character is defined by others throughout the story which is evident in the visceral reaction of the DeLaceys to his ghastly appearance, young William's verbal abuse of the monster when first encountering the it, and the mob response from any townspeople who catch a glimpse of the monster. From his beginning, the creature looks to Victor for guidance (the most painful of the monster's rejections) and watches the DeLacey family for an extended time period (also ending in rejection). The monster in contemplating his isolation which surpasses his comprehension states:

I was dependent on none and related to none. 'The path of my departure was free,' and there was none to lament my annihilation. 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? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them.

(Shelley 116)

Frankenstein's monster is influenced by many others, yet he is not leaning on others for support. Furthermore, even if the monster attempted to seek support and understanding, he would find rejection. Both the DeLaceys and Frankenstein respond in fear upon the first sight of the monster. The way the monster impacts himself is akin to Frankenstein—withdrawing into self and inducing a domino effect of self-destruction; however, Frankenstein retreats out of fear for what he has done while the monster's response results from the fear projected onto him by others. A singular difference is clear; Frankenstein's monster seeks cathartic validation from his creator, is rejected, and plummets into isolation.

In another world and vastly different setting, both Frankenstein and his monster wrestle with an intellectual turmoil parallel to Hamlet's. All three characters pine, whether consciously or subconsciously, for their trouble to be heard, seen, and validated. The reader observes the

inherent need for trauma to be heard by others, yet the characters' reactions skew their perceptions causing them to perpetuate their trauma as they individually try to overcome their troubles. This flawed method of reacting, or coping, is what disrupts relationships throughout the two stories.

### *Characters' Inability to Cope*

In order to understand trauma and its impacts, it is necessary to understand the term *coping*. According to the Psychology Dictionary coping is “the employment of mental and behavioral methods to control the stipulations of a scenario when such are claimed to be wearing or beyond one's abilities or to lessen the advantages and strife resulting from stressors” (“Coping”). Trauma is beyond the limits of human comprehension and individuals are often left to find their own ways of coping. It is important for individuals to cope in a way that is healthy, breaks their compulsion to repeat trauma, and depends on others for assistance. Hamlet attempts to create his own validation after searching his inner self. When Hamlet is first introduced into the play, he is very sarcastic, sassy, and moody, exhibiting traits that would often be attributed to a stereotypical “angsty teen.” Despite being in his mid-20’s, Hamlet truly sounds like an adolescent in his interaction with Claudius and Gertrude in the second scene of the first act. Claudius asks Hamlet, “How is it that the clouds still hang on you?” and Hamlet replies, “Not so, my lord, I am too much i’th’sun” (1.2.67-68). Gertrude joins saying, “Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off” (1.2.69) and “Thou know’st ‘tis common: all that lives must die” (1.2.73) and Hamlet simply admits “Ay, madam, it is common” (1.2.75). After the passing of King Hamlet Gertrude speedily marries Claudius. Hamlet retorts here with the pain of loss without informing his mother why he is upset and how he has been wounded. This interaction begins Hamlet’s shift into diffusing his trauma through acting insane and brooding.



Growing up in an affluent family, Hamlet has not had to grapple with the struggles such as poverty that plague many middle-class and lower-class individuals. Therefore, many of his struggles are mental rather than physical. While Hamlet has never been a soldier, Lisa Starks offers a soldier analogy to contextualize Hamlet's descent into inner chaos, saying that a "war neurosis waged war with himself, and his drive for self-preservation was not necessarily more powerful than his counter drive toward self-destruction" (188). This is directly what Hamlet moves toward in the trauma he causes in the play. The prince spurns his mother and father-in-law/uncle, spurns Ophelia, kills Polonius (thus affecting Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia, and Laertes), butts heads with Laertes, and seeks to kill Claudius. Not only does he have an inner dialogue running, evident in his five soliloquies, but he also seems to take everyone down with him in his self-destructive spiral.

While Hamlet does act subversively toward his 'parents' upon the death of his father and meeting the father's ghost, he does not immediately take revenge—he hesitates. Starks explains this as "The subject does not seem to experience the traumatic event at the time, but the memory of it returns in literal, undisguised dreams which force the dreamer to experience the event over and again" (187). The return of memory is precisely what contributes to the cycle of trauma as defined in the previous section. Hamlet initially runs from the heavy trauma that weighs down his heart. Once again, he lacks the ability or knowledge to share with others and process what he has encountered and these "attempts fail because, as a species of traumatic repetition, they inevitably revisit and reinforce the earlier trauma" (Hirschfeld 436). One of the most prominent times when Hamlet hesitates to kill the king is when he says:

Now might I do it pat, now he is a-praying.

And now I'll do't.

And so he goes to heaven;  
 And so am I revenged. That would be scanned:  
 A villain kills my father, and for that  
 I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
 To heaven.  
 Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge. (3.3.76-83)

Little does Hamlet know but Claudius is unsuccessful in his prayers, and a great opportunity is missed for Hamlet to complete his quest.

On the other hand, Minton and Antonen present a differing point of view on Hamlet's courses of action. They look at the signs of healing evident in the description that Shakespeare gives. They say, "Rather than deny or run from the emotional pain, he [Hamlet] confronts the situation with an action plan. And when he comes through that crisis, he is changed, transformed. We see him in Act V—decisive, sensitive, able to forgive, able to see the big picture. Rather than a confused, frenetic Hamlet, this prince is now self-assured, empowered, and no longer dressed in black" (470). Hamlet appears to work towards breaking his own personal cycle of trauma, despite the fact that the trauma cycles anew for those left behind. Hamlet's unhealthy way of coping with trauma through the majority of the play leaves a lasting impact on the community around him.

As previously established, Frankenstein flees from his delayed trauma which is exacerbated by the fact that "Frankenstein is so blind—in fact so comically blind—he believes that 'spirits' are responsible" (545) which has a significant effect on the surrounding characters (to be discussed further in the next section). Victor's blindness is seen by the reader in his self-imposed isolation in multiple places in the text. When Frankenstein is at the University and first

begins his research to make the monster he thinks “I, who had ever been surrounded by amiable companions... I was now alone.... I must form my own friends and be my own protector” (Shelley 37). Even more so he states “I shunned my fellow-creatures as if I had been guilty of a crime,” (47) and later on, “*No one* can conceive the anguish I suffered” [emphasis mine] (Shelley 66). In this situation Victor is drawing within himself and shutting out everyone around him without fully taking into account the lives of Elizabeth, Clerval, Walton, Felix, and even that of the monster. Considering Victor’s appalling selfishness in leaving family and friends to seek personal vengeance, the reader is left to empathize with the monster and despise the actions of Dr. Frankenstein.

The monster Frankenstein creates also demonstrates his own methods of coping. He will never fit in “which seems to be the lot the monster receives and, “[n]o one wants him—he is completely rejected by humanity” (Dilley 136). The monster seems to echo these sentiments as he is repeatedly rejected by humanity which leads to his bitterness and hate for the human race. The creature shouts “Cursed, cursed Creator! .... I could with pleasure have destroyed the cottage and its inhabitants and have glutted myself with their shrieks and misery” (Shelley 123) showing his bitterness. Upon searching for a place to stay and not understanding the language of humans or customs after first being created, the wandering daemon encounters angry humans who react negatively to the ugly creature. This is a recurring theme the more Frankenstein’s monster develops.

Not only does the trauma of Hamlet, Frankenstein, and Frankenstein’s monster deeply affect each character and their coping, but also the characters have a profound impact on those around them. It is worth considering that Shelley is extending a warning to the human race (readers specifically) to cope with trauma cautiously, taking into account those around us. To

contextualize the frequency of trauma it is worthwhile to consider the data on national estimates for nonfatal injuries published by the CDC's NCIPC (Center for Disease Control's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control). In 2013, just shy of 27,000,000 individuals in the United States alone were victim of unintentional falls, cut/piercing, assaults (nonsexual), poisoning, and overexertion. Not all of the mentioned causes of nonfatal injuries are results of violence but can be considered trauma, nonetheless. All people suffer at some level and encounter varying allotments of trauma. How one copes can have great significance on the lives of those around him, whether one realizes it or not.

### *Impact on Community*

The impact that all three characters have on the fictional world they live in extends much further than themselves. Hamlet, on his revenge course, eventually decides “[t]o put an antic disposition on” (1.5.191) or as a modern paraphrase “I may perhaps think it best to feign insanity” (1.5.191). Readers are never offered an explanation extent of Hamlet's madness.

Initially, it is Claudius and Gertrude who receive the full force of Hamlet's “angsty teen response.” Hamlet says to his mother, “But I have that within which passes show, / These but the trappings and the suits of woe” (1.2.87-88) expressing the depth of his hurt within. As Gertrude is a mother by nature, this would most certainly pull on her heart strings and she would be entreated by the situation to question Hamlet further. Later in the play we explicitly see Gertrude say, “Oh Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain” (3.4.172). Perhaps Hamlet's harsh treatment of his mother can be attributed to his need to share his pain with family. Minton and Antonen this idea more deeply:

Despite its universal and normal nature, suffering calls forth a need for appropriate responses from family, friends, and rituals through which suffering may be eased. We

ache seeing our loved ones suffer yet grow weary with protracted suffering and may even question its validity. This dilemma creates "double suffering," i.e., being denied on suffering by family, friends, caregivers, even oneself, but still suffering. (468)

As this "double suffering" is what Hamlet endures, he takes it out on other individuals.

Ophelia is also a large receptor of Hamlet's abuse. She is told by Polonius "from this time forth / Have you so slander any moment leisure / As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet" (1.3.139-140) showing that her rejection of Hamlet's love was forced. Polonius also tells Claudius "And then I prescripts gave her, / That she should lock herself from his resort, / Admit no messengers, receive no tokens" (2.2.147-149). The effect of this on Hamlet is palpable when Ophelia reports he "with his doublet all unbraced" (2.1.86) approaches her seeming haggard and in despair. Hamlet is pushed further into his "antic disposition" after these happenings. Hirschfeld comments on Hamlet's later verbal abuse of Ophelia which mirrors the guilt he heaps onto his mother, Gertrude, "In his meetings with Ophelia, for instance, his vicious attacks on her chastity disguise attacks both on Gertrude's indiscriminating sexuality and on his own conception" (441). Hamlet makes comments that are very suggestive of Ophelia having less than honorable behavior saying, "Ay, or any show that you will show him. Be not you / ashamed to show, he'll not shame to tell you what it means" (3.2.137-138). Hamlet has been denied Ophelia and in response does his best to guilt her already (unknown to Hamlet) guilty conscience.

The interactions with Ophelia demonstrate how Hamlet chooses to respond to happenings in his life. What is unexpected, however, is Hamlet's perceiving Laertes as a brother. This is seen in the text as Hamlet and Laertes engage in the final duel of the play. Hamlet says, "I embrace it freely, / And will this brother's wager frankly play" (5.2.245-246). Hirschfeld claims "Hamlet's

fraternal focus on Laertes at the moment is part of the symptomatic pattern that realizes the filial relation with which the prince has struggled throughout the play. In killing and being killed by his ‘brother,’ Hamlet repeats a fratricide that confirms or actualizes a more primal event: the death of the father” (Hirschfeld 443). Yet, interestingly enough, Hamlet perpetuates this “primal event” in killing Polonius and Laertes and Ophelia are left fatherless. Hamlet exclaims, “How now? A rat! Dead for a ducat, dead” (3.4.26) which occurs right before the stage directions say, “*He thrusts his rapier through the arras*” (3.4.26). Mellon states that “Polonius’s death has many fascinating aspects...It seems that Hamlet acts without thinking of anyone—it is irrelevant whether he thinks Claudius or Polonius is behind the curtain, and he himself does not care about the consequences” (Mellon 120) highlighting Hamlet’s careless nature in his revenge quest. Hamlet has let himself get out of control and no longer has any care for those around him. He has stayed within himself in coping with his trauma and it has erupted in this instance with the death of Polonius.

It seems “Revenge in *Hamlet* is a means of revisiting a traumatic scene, not one for resolving it” (Hirschfeld 439). As Hamlet’s trauma is not being resolved, all he can conceive is revenge which he exacts throughout the play. Mellon calls readers to remember that the prince, Fortinbras, who symbolizes the very ideals that allowed for all the death in *Hamlet*, who appears in the ending scenes saying, “Fortinbras’ presence and words indicate that such trauma will continue well into the future” (123). Mellon observes that the trauma in Denmark is far from over. The unbroken trauma results from the lack of resolution of Hamlet’s own trauma. Furthermore, in Hamlet’s dying breath when he asks Horatio to live and tell his story “Hamlet’s choice of words, calling Horatio to draw his breath in pain, reflects the furthering of the trauma to cause pain to others still in the world of the living” (Mellon 122). Hamlet impacts all of these

characters and more with the ways in which he fails to cope with his trauma. Perhaps this implores the audience to consider how individuals respond to their own trauma affects those around them.

Similar to Hamlet's ignorance of his effect on the individuals around him, Frankenstein is blind to the way his decisions harm or help his friends and family. Frankenstein is either caught up in denial or is the least intelligent genius ever. He creates another life form yet is fully unaware of how his actions impact the people in his life until after it is pertinent. Frankenstein realizes his impact each time after something goes wrong and someone dies. It is his self-absorbed ignorance that leads the reader to believe Frankenstein is the true monster in this novel.

Victor has such an impact those around him that in his disregard for others and obsession with his own safety, not his wife's, is what leads to Elizabeth's unfortunate murder (Oates 552). Elizabeth has already gone through great adversity herself, the death of her parents, which culminates in her own death. Marrying Victor appears to have been a choice that led Elizabeth to even greater trauma. Frankenstein causes Elizabeth great trauma in leaving home so frequently and inadvertently causing the death of two people she loves: William and Justine. Victor leaves Elizabeth and his family in the first creating of the monster, withdraws in sickness and depression with his guilt, and disappears when his monster commands him to build a female monster.

Furthermore, after being charged by the demon to create a partner, which Victor refuses, results in the monster saying, "It is well. I go; but remember, I shall be with you on your wedding-night" (Shelley 155). These words echo in Victor's head until Elizabeth is found "there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair" (Shelley 181). Oates further says, regarding Frankenstein, that

“he never feels any remorse for what he has done and never considers that, in ‘mangling’ the flesh of his demon's bride, he is murdering the pious and rather too perfect Elizabeth, the cousin-bride whom he professes to love” (553), giving further evidence of Victor’s negligence towards the significance his actions have on the rest of the world.

To contextualize the impact Frankenstein has on his family, Phillips notes that in class discussions, students examined how Frankenstein’s family is deeply affected by his choices and how the story outcome may have changed if Victor listened to his family rather than ignoring them while creating the monster (89). Had Victor not disregarded his family and friends, he might have taken a different path preventing the family experiencing the brunt of the monster’s wrath.

The monster itself has clear and straightforward impacts on others within the novel. All of the more minor characters go through a lot of struggle, especially the death and trauma that follow the monster. Elizabeth and Henry Clerval are without choice made a part of the struggle between Victor and his monster. Their deaths along with those of William and Justine are direct products of Frankenstein’s negligence, blindness, and selfishness. By the end of the novel as Victor draws his final breaths, he most certainly feels the weight of these deaths on his chest. Frankenstein’s trauma is heard by one man, Robert Walton, and the cycle is broken with the ending of the doctor’s life. The monster is hurting and coping with his trauma in ways that cause him to resort to this killing and the monster would attribute this to his abandonment by Frankenstein. The monster is quoted saying, “I discovered that he, the author at once of my existence and of its unspeakable torments...sought his own enjoyment in feelings and passions from the indulgence of which I was forever barred, then impotent envy and bitter indignation filled me with an insatiable thirst for vengeance” (Shelley 202). Frankenstein made choices that



result in a monster which caused death and agony for Victor and the rest of the characters of the story. Most of the trauma in *Frankenstein* can be traced back, in some way or another, to the monster.

### *Closing Remarks*

Hamlet's frivolous killing of Polonius or unintentionally driving Ophelia to suicide and Victor's self-absorption which causes the deaths of the very ones he wanted to protect make it quite clear that letting trauma stay isolated allows it to fester and birth more trauma. Perhaps if these two worlds were to meet, the characters might view each other's trauma, understand it, and discover better ways for dealing with their own trauma which continues to be incomprehensible. Maybe if the two were to meet, they would encounter the acceptance needed to break their traumatic cycles.

*Hamlet* and *Frankenstein* serve as mirrors for humanity to see themselves in. When peering into a mirror, individuals notice one of two things: either self-absorbed perfections or flaws in the image they see. Frankenstein's monster not only serves to teach about coping and the way individuals impact one another but also acts as a vessel for the readers themselves to cope through. Sawyer explains this idea where "[T]he novel, just like [Shelley's] monster, represents many things to many people, and the creature functions as a tabula rasa on which we inscribe our own fears and hopes, aspirations and limitations" (Sawyer 26) allowing the monster and the novel reflect far more than would a simple ghost story or pop culture misrepresentation. The monster in *Frankenstein* has the potential to be viewed as a victim (a product of the way he was treated), an antagonist whose anger and bloodlust that lacks mercy, or a mixture of the both. Hamlet may be seen as a poor son who cannot handle the loss of a father, a sadistic prince who seeks to project his pain on those around him, or also a combination of the two. Individuals may

choose to see in the stories whatever resonates with them and reflects back based on the experiences they had. The inherent beauty in literature allows for this difference in resonating with different individuals in a variety of ways and allows for many different responses. The cycle of trauma is similar. Individuals might react in a variety of ways but looking for support sharing one's story is the key for resolution.

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