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Irish-Ann Burch  
*Belmont University*

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## Birth, Death, and Recreation: An Archetypal Interpretation of Mary Shelley's Waking Vision

Irish-Ann Burch

Belmont University

### ABSTRACT

*Mary Shelly, the author of Frankenstein (Shelley, 1831), experienced a waking vision, leading to the creation of Frankenstein. Using Jungian theory, the characters in Frankenstein can be understood as projections of Mary's repressed feelings. These projections occurred because of Mary's strong identification with the mother archetype, consisting of 1) the maternal element and 2) the Eros. Mary had a hypertrophy (exaggerated identification) of the maternal element and a strong identification with the Eros, due to the early death of her mother and the later deaths of her three children. These events combined to produce Mary's unique personality development and her creation of Frankenstein.*

On June 16th, 1816 Mary Shelley was lost in a waking dream (Mellor, 1988) which would later be amplified into one of the most famous horror stories in history, Frankenstein (Shelley, 1831). In her waking dream Mary saw "with shut eyes, but acute mental vision...the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together" (Shelley, 1831, p.8). As her waking dream continued, Mary began to feel the horror that the student in her dream felt as he looked upon the monstrous corpse he had recreated with a "spark of life" (Shelley, 1831, p.8). She saw the student "rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken. He would hope that left to itself...this...thing would subside into dead matter. [The student] sleeps, but he is awakened. He opens his eyes. Behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside...looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes" (Shelley, 1831, p.8)

Why was Mary, only nineteen-years-old, having a terrifying waking dream about the mystery of life? Interpreters of Frankenstein have tried to understand the novel in a variety of ways. For example, Ellen Moers sees the novel from a feminist's perspective, Huber, Widdifield and Johnson approached the novel as an Adlerian odyssey, and Robert Kiely associated "Frankenstein" with Mary's husband, Percy Shelley.

The purpose of this article is to bring Jungian thought to bear on the origins of Mary Shelley's waking dream and the subsequent creation of Frankenstein. Frankenstein exists not only as a respected novel, but also as a detailed and powerful record of Mary's unconscious. The novel is a complex narrative of her most basic fears and longings. The themes of birth, death and recreation have intrigued interpreters of this novel for decades (Huber, Widdifield & Johnson, 1989; Moers, 1976; & Kiely, 1972). However, none of these authors has understood the archetypal significance of these motifs. And while the novel has been a challenge for psychological study, so is Mary's life and person.

Mary Shelley was left motherless at birth, an event of great psychological significance. She was the daughter of two of the most famous and radical literary giants of the eighteenth century, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin (Mellor, 1988). Eight days after childbirth Mary Wollstonecraft died of complications and Mary Shelley was left with only a father, whom she adored and for whom she would do anything. However, her father did not return her love, but instead remarried another woman with whom Mary competed and continually argued (Mellor, 1988).

When Mary was fifteen-years-old, she first met Percy Shelley, her future husband. Percy was also a famous literary figure and possessed many of the qualities that Mary's own father had. They both fell madly in love, but had to run away to be together because Percy was already married. The elopement caused Godwin to disown his daughter, but Mary had found a new and more loving "father", Percy

Shelley. Mary and Percy were not legally married until after the death of his first wife (Mellor, 1988).

Mary had difficulty adjusting to Percy's lifestyle. He tended to surround himself with adoring women, and for much of their relationship, Mary's step-sister, Claire, lived with them and probably had a love affair with Percy (Mellor, 1988). This situation aggravated Mary with increasing intensity throughout her relationship with Percy.

During these tempestuous times, Mary clung to the idea of having a baby, which she felt would strengthen her and Percy's love. She got her wish, for a short while, after the birth of Clara (named after Claire, out of loyalty). Mary was thrilled and hoped to give her daughter all the love and warmth that her mother never had the chance to give to her.

Tragically, a few weeks later Mary wrote in her journal, "Find baby dead. Send for Hogg. Talk. a miserable day." (Mellor, 1988, p. 32). Mourning for months the death of her first baby girl, she began to have nightmares where the "little baby came to life again" (Mellor, 1988, p. 32). Mary became pregnant around a year later and gave birth to a son.

Over the following months, Mary was both physically and mentally drained by the death of her first child and the difficult pregnancy of her second. These events were accompanied by long analytical conversations with Percy and his poet friend Byron. These interactions further eroded Mary's mental stamina. In this weakened psychological state, Mary's waking vision came forth, a vision that became one of the most famous literary works of its time. Mary's unconscious was in turmoil and from her fears and obsessions came the "birth" of Frankenstein. Mary's waking vision and her recurring obsession with birth, death and recreation may be understood with the ideas of Carl Gustav Jung.

Jung spent the last forty years of his life investigating the archetypes of the collective unconscious (Hopke, 1989). For Jung, the collective unconscious was a psychic layer deeper and more archaic than the traditional Freudian unconscious (Jung,

1959). Every person is born with the same archetypal molds, but each person identifies with each differently and experiences each archetype in his or her unique way. Archetypes are akin to photographic negatives and they (the archetypes) are developed through life experience (Hall & Nordby, 1973). This developing process determines how each person relates to and is influenced by the archetypes. Over identifying and under identifying with the archetypes affects a person's neuroses, complexes and his or her perception of self and others. The archetypes exert a powerful influence in shaping the personality. For this reason, this article will focus primarily on how Mary Shelley's life both influenced and was influenced by her expression of certain archetypes.

The most important archetype in Mary's personality was the mother archetype (Jung, 1959). This archetype influenced how she expressed her feminine side. Like all archetypes, the mother archetype begins developing in infancy and continues forming and transforming throughout life.

When the infant is born, usually his or her first significant relations are with the mother, and, from these first encounters, the infant starts to develop the mother archetype. The mother archetype plays an important role in a woman's understanding of her feminine aspect and all that it includes (Jung, 1959). The mother archetype has two main subdivisions; the maternal element and the Eros (Jung, 1959). Mary had different identifications with each of these and each had its positive and negative influences.

Since Mary had no real relationship with her mother, she had a significant identification with the maternal element of the mother archetype. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was a literary giant of the eighteenth century, and Mary Shelley viewed her with tremendous admiration, even though she never knew her. Because of her mother's absence, Mary created an ideal picture of the missing maternal element. Left to her imagination, Mary fabricated her dead mother as the perfect wife and mother. Mary read everything her



mother wrote and was constantly comparing her evil step-mother to her saint-like dead biological mother. Thus, she began to develop her mother archetype with an exaggerated maternal element. Mary had poor live models of the maternal element, so she created her own ideal model, and then identified with it.

Mary's archetype of the maternal element was developed even more perfectly because she viewed her mother's death as the ultimate female sacrifice. The maternal element puts childbearing before everything, even one's own life (Jung, 1959). Her mother gave her own life so that Mary could have hers. What greater sacrifice could be made? Mary's view of her mother's death as the ultimate sacrifice and her idealization of her caused a hypertrophy (exaggerated identification) of the maternal element of the mother archetype. As a result, Mary viewed childbearing as the most important part of being a woman.

Coinciding with the above psychological situation, Mary also had an overdeveloped Eros. This combination is a unique mix. While she over identified with her mother maternally, she became competitive with her mother in all other areas. When a daughter has an overdeveloped Eros, her primary concern becomes trying to outshine her mother, making the daughter jealous of the mother (Jung, 1959). In her competition, Mary hoped to take her mother's place in her father's eyes. As a child, Mary wrote essays and tried to impress her father with her intellectual abilities. Jung (1959) explained this spontaneous development of intellect as the daughter's way of outdoing her mother.

Jung (1959) also stated that an overdeveloped Eros in a daughter "almost invariably leads to an unconscious incestuous relationship with the father" (p.88). Mary idealized her father and loved him dearly, but he continuously rejected her love. Despite this rejection Mary persisted in her paternal love and would do anything he asked (Mellor, 1988). She was also extremely jealous of her stepmother's relationship with her father, and Mary tried repeatedly to come between them (Mellor,

1988). Mary's attempts to surpass her mother and her incestuous feelings towards her father are both indicative of her overdeveloped Eros.

Mary Shelley's unique development of the mother archetype contributed to her remarkable personality. Commonly, daughters identify more strongly with either the maternal element or the Eros at different periods in their life (Jung, 1959). However, Mary identified with both during the same period.

Through these archetypal developments, Mary's personality took on its unique character. Her hypertrophy of the maternal element created an obsessive need to bear children. When she was sixteen-years-old and eloped with Percy, Mary became obsessed with pregnancy. She was convinced that having a child would correct all their problems. After her first child died, Mary became depressed for months and began having nightmares. She became pregnant again a year later, but this child also died at a young age. Mary tried once more to have a child. Her third child, a baby girl, again died at a young age (Mellor, 1988).

It was after the birth of her second child, in her weakened psychological state, that Mary saw the horrific image of Dr. Frankenstein and his monstrous creation. This image was a vivid projection of Mary's denied feelings. The hypertrophy of the maternal element and her unconscious desire to exist beyond her children expressed itself through her waking vision. Such hypertrophy indicates extreme psychological imbalance (Jung, 1959). Internal balance is achieved when all archetypes are free to be expressed fully. In Mary's case, however, she over identified with the maternal element so much that she was consciously unable to see any other meaningful purpose in her life. Mary was trapped between the role of a daughter who caused her mother's death, and a mother who caused her daughter's death. This conflict also contributed to the later experience of her waking vision.

Frankenstein is a recorded document of Mary's repressed feelings. Dr. Frankenstein, the selfish creator in the novel, is the embodiment of a negative

maternal element. Dr. Frankenstein does not live for his children, but wants his children to live for him; and, once he has children, he wishes them to be dead. Dr. Frankenstein's feelings are projections of Mary's repressed emotions.

The monster in the novel is a contradiction, an unloved creation. However, since the monster was created by a selfish creator it makes more sense that he was not loved. Here again Mary projected an unconscious element. This feeling of something being unloved stemmed from her desire to love her children. It was her unconscious expressing the possibility of something she created being unloved.

The maternal element also aided Mary in laboring through the writing of *Frankenstein*. In the prologue of the novel, Mary refers to *Frankenstein* as her "hideous progeny" (p.8), showing an equivalence between childbirth and writing the book. Not only did the maternal element influence the contents of the book, but it also influenced the creative process of writing the book.

In addition to these obsessive qualities associated with the hypertrophy of the maternal element, a positive effect arose. Throughout her life, Mary took care of all those around her. Although this behavior took away from Mary's life in some respects, she was often fulfilled by seeing her friends and husband happy. Her strong identification with the maternal element caused her to help many people, and from this she found some happiness.

Mary's overdeveloped Eros affected her later in life by contributing to a strong sense of competition and to her remarkable talent for writing prose. She strove to be the very best in the literary arena. She went well beyond the traditional woman's education and even beyond that of a traditional man.

Why was Mary Shelley able to write so eloquently about her struggle with the maternal element? It was a combination of her parentage, her overdeveloped Eros and her strong identification with the maternal element. Losing her mother as an infant, set in motion a theme in Mary's life. She started in life with missing pieces of

her personality, and, because of circumstances, she created ideal images of the mother archetype, which eventually caused her great pain.

By the time she was nineteen years old, she had spent nineteen long years of refusing to experience any feelings that contradicted her early formed ideals of the mother archetype. Timing, combined with the death of her child, finally allowed all of her repressed emotions to be expressed through projection. Thus *Frankenstein* was created. The novel was a recreation of portions of her own psyche.

It was natural for Mary to express her conflict through writing. From an early age she was encouraged to write, and thus it became her most comfortable means of expression. While consciously becoming more self-aware would have been more psychologically healthy, writing was the only vehicle she was capable of using to confront her own feelings. If she had tried to confront consciously her feelings about her mother's death and her children's deaths, she possibly would have made great leaps in self-awareness. However, the idea of this must have frightened Mary Shelley terribly. *Frankenstein* lives in literary history to document the psychological struggle of a great writer.

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