

# The Man Who Loved Frankenstein

DOUGLAS SADOWNICK

**B**ACK IN THE EARLY 1980's, when I was an English literature grad student, *Frankenstein* was something of a controversial work. Many thumbed their nose at Mary Shelley's popular gothic novel as inferior to the genius of her husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Others argued that *Frankenstein* was a feminist take on the male envy of female procreation. Despite how trapped I was by the various ideologies of the academy, I was also claiming my gay identity for the first time, and I began to see that I could think for myself, if only a little. I started to feel that Mary Shelley's epic possessed a better—and by far a gayer—grasp on the supernatural than that of her "superiors." I was fascinated by the idea of procreating a "person" of the same sex as oneself, and also by the sustained eloquence of the Creature rejected by his father, not to mention the suffering of Dr. Victor Frankenstein himself, whose fear of retribution by the spurned Monster-Daemon-Creature mirrored a dimly felt agony I quietly suffered as my budding gay personhood was being internally attacked by resilient messages of hate (what I later learned to identify as "toxic shame" and "internalized homophobia").

My curiosity about *Frankenstein* was confirmed when I left academia to become an activist. During this period, I entered therapy to deal with why I felt so persecuted inside, and was given an unpublished paper written in 1977 by Jungian-oriented psychologist Mitch Walker, "The Problem of Frankenstein" (now posted on [www.uranianpsych.org](http://www.uranianpsych.org)), that analyzed Frankenstein as a gay love story. Walker had an idea that an archetypal soul configuration—which he called the "double"—was at the heart of the felt human capacity for True Love and self-realization—but only if monstrous "competitor" qualities were consciously wrestled with in a process that eventually revealed this inner twin to be a magical phallic lover and mediator between the ego-identity and the underworld of the psyche.

My growing sense that *Frankenstein* amounted to a canonical "gay" literary work on a par with Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was finally validated this year when I learned that gay historian John Lauritsen had published a new book, *The Man Who Wrote Frankenstein*. Lauritsen is known as a gay liberationist who co-authored, with David Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)* back in 1974. Lauritsen makes three main points in his new work: that *Frankenstein* is really a "profound and moving masterpiece"; that the real author of *Frankenstein* is Percy Bysshe Shelley, not his second wife, the former Mary Godwin; and that "Male love is the dominant theme of *Frankenstein*." He

also accomplishes another commendable feat: he psychologically analyzes the material.

These are powerful—and provocative—contributions. Provocative not just because Lauritsen contends that *Frankenstein* principally revolves around themes of romantic same-sex love, but because he furthermore proposes that the tale was written by a male homosexual—the great Percy Shelley, no less. Lauritsen poses a bold and controversial challenge to the entrenched literary establishment as well as to postmodern feminist critics who have claimed Mary as one of their heroines in a male-dominated literary canon. What's more, he takes no prisoners in his effort to debunk Mary's authorship of *Frankenstein*, which he characterizes as a "myth" and a "hoax." (He even admits at one point to being "overly severe" in dethroning her.)

As a key piece of evidence, Lauritsen explains how there are two versions of *Frankenstein* that differ markedly. The original 1818 version (only available from Norton) is notably different from the "official" 1831 version quoted in scholarship and assigned in schools. Lauritsen argues the later version was "bowdlerized"—dehomosexualized and otherwise corrupted—by Mary and her father, the renowned philosopher William Godwin, after Percy's death. Lauritsen further argues that Mary Shelley's other works don't come close to displaying the same literary quality as

Lauritsen proposes that the tale was written by a male homosexual—the great Percy Shelley, no less.

*Frankenstein*. In addition, Percy's decision to attribute authorship of *Frankenstein* to Mary can be explained by the book's salacious nature—and its homoerotic subtext, by which Percy might have inadvertently "outed" himself. It is difficult to appreciate fully the terrifying violence that was inflicted on homosexuals during Shelley's time, both official (hangings) and unofficial (lynchings), so it makes sense that the poet might have shied away from associating himself with *Frankenstein*. Often we need to "read between the lines" of historical texts to recover our literary history due to self-censorship of this kind.

The second part of Lauritsen's book is a sensitive line-by-line reading of *Frankenstein* as, at heart, Percy's coming-out saga. For example, consider how Captain Walton writes to his sister about rescuing a now broken Victor Frankenstein, washed up by the sea and by life. Almost everyone Victor loves has been killed by the Creature, including Victor's intimate friend Henry Clerval. Lauritsen shows how Walton, who is the actual narrator of *Frankenstein*, falls in love with Victor as he nurses him back to health. Lauritsen highlights how Victor returns the affection, at which time Walton "comes out" to Victor:

One day I mentioned to him the desire I had always felt of finding a friend who might sympathize with me, and direct me by his counsel. I said, I did not belong to that class of men who are offended by advice. "I am self-educated, and perhaps I hardly rely

Douglas Sadowick PhD, is director of the LGBT studies specialization at Antioch University, Los Angeles.

sufficiently upon my own powers. I wish therefore that my companion should be wiser and more experienced than myself, to confirm and support me; nor have I believed it impossible to find a true friend."

"I agree with you," replied the stranger, "in believing that friendship is not only a desirable, but a possible acquisition. I once had a friend, the most noble of human creatures, and am entitled, therefore, to judge respecting friendship. You have hope, and the world before you, and have no cause for despair. But I—I have lost everything, and cannot begin life anew."

Lauritsen argues convincingly that these two men have "revealed themselves to each other as gay men, using probing, indirect, and coded language—as gay men have done for centuries and continue to do in the present." To support his view, he elucidates the virulently homophobic sociology of Shelley's time, and explains how, since the mid-18th century, the word "friend" has been a "code word for the lover of another man." He quotes from Percy Shelley's essay "On Love" to demonstrate that for him, love is homosexual: "We are born into the world, and there is something within us, which from the instant that we live, more and more thirsts after its likeness." Lauritsen informs us that Percy wrote with the *sunetoi* (the initiated) and the *Vernunftige* (a code for gay) in mind, using the Greek word to refer to the Hellenistic homosexuality in Shelley's romanticism and the German to refer to the homosexuality in German romantic poets like Goethe and Schiller.

Lauritsen sees the unfolding congress between Victor and Walton as "informed by the ancient Greek model of pedagogical eros: Frankenstein is the *erastes* (inspirer) and Walton, the *eromenos* (listener)." And it is from within this seductive context that Victor confides in Walton his darkest secret, his desire to have created "a being like myself of simpler organization." Lauritsen considers the following excerpt to be "one of the most intense and vivid scenes in English literature, the animation of the creature," and he invites us to enter into its lush eroticism:

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great god! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath: his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness.

What happens next is a classic example of what can be seen to transpire in so many gay romantic dates, flings, and "hook-ups" today. As quickly as Victor falls in love with the monster, he suffers a hateful reversal: "the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart." Why does this happen? According to Lauritsen, the good doctor "seems to be exhibiting 'homosexual panic'—hysteria resulting from a clash between intense homosexual desire and social condemnation." No wonder the otherwise loving monster turns against his creator when Frankenstein repudiates him. "'I expected this reception,' said the Daemon. 'All men hate the wretched.'" Of course, the Creature, having internalized his creator's rejection of him, has now come to see himself as "wretched," not unlike the way modern gay people internalize parental heterosexist prejudice.

What makes this book additionally relevant and cutting-edge,

## The Man Who Wrote Frankenstein

by John Lauritsen

Pagan Press. 232 pages, \$16.95

I think, is that Lauritsen attempts to psychoanalyze the work. This represents what I see as an important and growing trend in gay writing today, as reflected in the writings of other contemporary gay historians, such as

Will Roscoe and James T. Sears, who use psychological approaches to varying degrees in their analyses. Lauritsen does so in necessarily Freudian and Jungian ways (though he never cites either Freud or Jung), seeing the characters as representative of gay ego, id, and superego, as personifications of a single person's mental states. To this end, he argues that "Shelley is suggesting that the monster may exist only in his creator's mind." He goes so far as to venture a Jungian-esque analysis, saying that Percy "presents the monster as his *Doppelgänger*," a German word for "an apparition of a living person" that's normally translated as "double." Lauritsen differentiates aspects of this double symbol in three different ways: "Captain Walton and Victor Frankenstein represent thwarted male love; Frankenstein and Henry Clerval, idealized male love; and the creature, demonized male love." This is not far from how Mitch Walker in 1976 articulated three different aspects of the double archetype, which he proposed can manifest in two loving motifs as "the partner" and the "youth-adult" and in a third, hateful motif, as the "competitor."

Assuming that the monster symbolizes a part of Frankenstein's own psychology, the question arises, why then does the monster kill everyone Frankenstein loves? Lauritsen quotes from Percy's own review of *Frankenstein* to explain that "the creature was inherently good but had become evil in reaction to ostracism and persecution." Here it's not a huge leap to see the monster as representative of the tragic aspect of internalized homophobia (failed love, hurt, jealousy). Here I think Lauritsen could have gone further in exploring the violent aspect of Frankenstein's internalized homophobia—hatred, revenge, even murderousness—a condition that in my estimation is the primary cause of many serious psychologically-rooted problems that afflict many gay people (such as debilitating depression, self-destructive unsafe sex, and substance abuse).

In my opinion, it is imperative that all gay writings further develop a psychological approach to subject matter that addresses our psychic potential as gay people—as well as insidiously destructive internal violence—in an upfront way. Overall, I think Lauritsen does an admirable job of doing this, though I think that a weakness in the text is his failure to include how his own personal psychology involves itself in his writing. Just as Lauritsen says we can't avoid looking at Frankenstein's psychology, gay authors should not avoid the issue of their own subjectivity when analyzing a work. Because everything we express comes from our psychological complexes, including being informed to some degree by internalized homophobia, it is only the ethical thing to do for gay writers to be as upfront as possible about this. (And so for me, while I am struggling to compose this review, I am continually having to confront ways in which the violent and monstrous nature of my internalized homophobia confuses my thought processes and activates my narcissism. I secretly feel competitive with Lauritsen and want to show off my "brilliant" thinking function and take over the show as a compensation for my inferiority that can be conceptualized as a crushed little gay kid having been forced to grow up in an oftentimes violent and

chaotic hetero-normative family scene.)

Recent scholarship suggests that a more muscular gay-centered approach to dealing with historical and cultural material is on the upswing, and also that a psychological Zeitgeist may be developing among gay writers, in my view a powerfully encouraging sign that can only help us all to come more conscientiously to terms with and to work more thoroughly through the deeply embedded homophobic “Frankenstein’s monster” that lives inside of us. Such an effort can only help us become stronger, more effective, and more emotionally fulfilled as gay people today.

Much will have been gained for gay liberation when we have come to terms with our double and what Jung called our “shadow” as we move to what I see as the logical next state, the psychological stage, in gay liberation. Recognizing Frankenstein’s monster as a symbol of this shadow—and meanwhile reinstating *Frankenstein* the novel as a gay canonical work, written by Percy Shelley—can be an aspect of this process of enlightenment. Shelley’s book, whichever Shelley it was, has the virtue of focusing our attention on the fascinating mystery of homosexual romantic love and its darker side. ■