In the summer of 1816, Mary and Percy Shelley spent their “famous” summer in Geneva, passing their days with Lord Byron, John Polidori and Claire Clairmont. At this time, Shelley, born in 1797, was only nineteen years old, though she had already “led a profoundly disrupted life” (Brown 1), facing ostracism, debt, the death of her mother shortly after childbirth and the death of her illegitimate child with the then married Percy Bysshe Shelley (his wife later committed suicide, and Mary and Percy got married in 1816). Which brings us to Brown’s point that Mary Shelley was a very young author when she wrote *Frankenstein*, and her novel subsequently reveals a type of childish muddled-ness and an unsatisfying turmoil. But the impossibility of satisfaction perhaps serves a different purpose than the inability to pin-hole the elusive story into a certain category and instead provides us with the many possibilities of transformation, regarding both structural form and character/plot development. In “Frankenstein: A Child’s Tale,” Marshall Brown divides his essay into three separate sections, and so I, in turn, will follow his structure by responding to these parts. However, due to the shortness of “A Monster’s Tale” and its overlapping themes with “The Question of Form,” I have combined these first two sections into one.

**What is Gothic About *Frankenstein*?: The Question of Form**

In this first segment, Brown claims *Frankenstein* fails to adhere to the gothic model it aimed to imitate and furthermore, fails to follow the traditional definitions of “supernatural...a religious term referring to God and angels” (149). This failure to abide by any boundaries, or “unruliness” as Brown puts it, results in a black hole: “Without a proper determination, the self can do anything but can accomplish nothing, and that is precisely the dilemma of the monster at the heart
of Shelley’s novel” (153-4). Though he initially admits Shelley’s tale to be “something more connected and less amazing” than her intended ghost story, he later writes the novel “lacks continuity” and several “aspects of the plot” are difficult to explain, raising a number of examples regarding both Frankenstein’s and his monster’s superior intellects and the creature’s freakish ability to track his creator. In the end, Brown confidently concludes, “Frankenstein is itself a monster.”

But I argue the unbound-ness of “Shelley’s adolescent masterpiece” does accomplish something: the story’s “lack [of] a properly positioned selfhood” mirrors the possibilities of what Frankenstein and his creation can become, and have become. The monster’s skin isn’t supposed to fit. The monster is supposed to remain unnamed. The fact that no one can look at the monster long enough to judge it further highlights this changeability. Frankenstein is, after all, a story of transformation: life breathed, or electrified, into dead parts; the monster’s development of emotions, the scientist’s fatal sink into despair and revenge, etc. The form of the novel is suggestive of the Foucauldian panopticon, but it is not existence which is questioned, but rather an elucidation of the self (there is instead a “mutable” self, so to speak), and this is what drives the plot forward. While Brown remarks “the book isn’t as good as…any movie,” the opposite could also said to be true. Within the solid confines of “a remote castle” and “inarticulate grunts,” the monster and situation is static, but in “a world of infinite possibility,” transformation, and not necessarily “the improbable” (we foresee Frankenstein’s brutal dedication to his creation and his ensuing distress and unshakeable desire for the monster’s destruction), is inevitable.

As a brief digression, I would say even Brown’s claims of the “improbable” are uncertain, given the multiple layers of narration within the novel. The audience only sees the De Laceys’ story through the monster through Frankenstein through Walton – who can say how “accidental” Felix’s presence at Safie’s father’s trial was? This holds true for the monster’s story
as well, filtered as it is through the accounts of Frankenstein and Walton. The procession of coincidental occurrences may not have actually been that “coincidental” and events in between may have been purposely left out, given the speakers’ attempts for concision; in fact, Frankenstein admits he will not tire the listener with “tedious” events.

(Lastly, and perhaps this is me being ignorant and a little too snide, but Brown’s argument here feels as if it is the one without bounds. Because there is no definition of the “gothic novel,” he seems to contradict himself throughout, arguing the novel is too disjunct but then stating “gothic narratives cannot thus perspicuously connect.” Furthermore, Shelley’s own “situation” and the actual plot of the novel is sometimes difficult to distinguish, as Brown deeply intertwines the two, though the former is rather sparse.)

A Child’s Tale

Here, Brown seeks to examine how the novel exhibits “the perversity of childhood,” specifically through “the monster’s desire for a female companion.” Though his argument expands into arguing (not too successfully for me, but that is the topic of another papers) for the “childishness” of the novel, I want to look at this first claim from a more feminist perspective and in relation to Mellor’s “A Feminist Critique of Science.”

Science in the nineteenth century was often fraught with male-female metaphors, with the male as active initiator and female as passive receiver. Several descriptions of research had a male scientist probing, or penetrating, into the deep recesses and of Mother Nature. In Frankenstein, Frankenstein’s need for a female companion is replaced by his fixation with his experiments and his fervid attempts at unearthing the “secrets” of Nature, and yet the first request of his monster is for a mate, raising an issue Mellor touches in her paper: Frankenstein “has moved down rather than up the evolutionary ladder” (7) in his obsession, perhaps become less human, but does that mean the monster has moved up, i.e. become more human, because of
his desire for a female? “Infantile” may not be the right word in describing the monster’s desire; sure, his ways of achieving it may be naïve, but the desire itself seems natural, or at least more natural than Frankenstein’s craze for harvesting organs and other body parts in his quest for recognition. During his experimentation, Frankenstein is consumed only by thoughts of this goal, failing to write letters home and even neglecting the woman he loves most, Elizabeth.

To a lesser extent, Frankenstein also grows more “monsterly” as the novel progresses. While the creature is shunned by society for his horrid appearance, the scientist is similarly removed from others: first, voluntarily, when he submerges himself in the sciences, and second, unwillingly, when the monster murders those he cares about. After realizing the horror he has unleashed on the world, Frankenstein’s morals also seem to be compromised. Though Shelly is known for being ethically ambiguous in *Frankenstein*, it is interesting that the passage in which the monster appeals for justice – “You accuse me of murder; and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature. Oh, praise the eternal justice of man!” – follows almost immediately after the unjust condemnation of Justine. Depending on the reading of the monster’s story and our sympathies with him, Frankenstein’s reaction of his creation’s story could be just as, or even more, unjust. Where, then, does this place Frankenstein on the human-monster spectrum?

While the two parts of this essay may seem fragmented, I do want to say the overarching theme I had in mind was transformation, and I believe analyses of moments of transformation provide unique ways of studying form and feminism. Shelley’s novel, though brief, provides a treasure trove of insights into the natures of science, society, and the human psyche.