*What I mean by Female Gothic is easily defined: the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called*[*the Gothic*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/gothic.html)*. But what I mean -- or anyone else means -- by "the Gothic" is not so easily stated except that it has to do with fear. In Gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare. Not, that is, to reach down into the depths of the soul and purge it with pity and terror (as we say tragedy does), but to get to the body itself, its glands, muscles, epidermis, and circulatory system, quickly arousing and quickly allaying the physiological reactions to fear.*

*Certainly the earliest tributes to the power of Gothic writers tended to {91} emphasize the physiological.*[*Jane Austen*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/austen.html)*has Henry Tilney, in Northanger Abbey, say that he could not put down*[*Mrs. Radcliffe*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/radcliff.html)*'s Mysteries of Udolpho: "I remember finishing it in two days -- my hair standing on end the whole time." According to Hazlitt, Ann Radcliffe had mastered "the art of freezing the blood": "harrowing up the soul with imaginary horrors, and making the flesh creep and the nerves thrill." And Mary Shelley said she intended Frankenstein to be the kind of ghost story that would "curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart." Why such claims? Presumably because readers enjoyed these sensations. For example, in a work the Shelleys knew well,*[*Joanna Baillie*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/baillie.html)*'s verse play on the theme of addiction to artificial fear, the heroine prevails upon a handmaiden, against the best advice, to tell a horror story:*

*. . . Tell it, I pray thee.  
And let me cow'ring stand, and be my touch  
The valley's ice: there is a pleasure in it.  
Yea, when the cold blood shoots through every vein;  
When every pore upon my shrunken skin  
A knotted knoll becomes, and to mine ears  
Strange inward sounds awake, and to mine eyes  
Rush stranger tears, there is a joy in fear.*

*Orra: A Tragedy (*[*1812*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Indexes/timeline.html#1812)*)*

*At the time when literary Gothic was born, religious fears were on the wane, giving way to that vague paranoia of the modern spirit for which Gothic mechanisms seem to have provided welcome therapy.*[*Walter Scott*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/scott.html)*compared reading*[*Mrs. Radcliffe*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/radcliff.html)*to taking drugs, dangerous when habitual "but of most blessed power in those moments of pain and of languor, when the whole head is sore, and the whole heart sick. If those who rail indiscriminately at this species of composition, were to consider the quantity of actual pleasure which it produces, and the much greater proportion of real sorrow and distress which it alleviates, their philanthropy ought to moderate their critical pride, or religious intolerance." A grateful public rewarded Mrs. Radcliffe by making her the most popular and best paid English novelist of the eighteenth century. Her preeminence among the "Terrorists," as they were called, was hardly challenged in her own day, and modern readers of Udolpho and The Italian continue to hail her as mistress of the pure Gothic form.*

*As early as the 1790s, Ann Radcliffe firmly set the Gothic in one of the ways it would go ever after: a novel in which the central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine. But what are we to make of the next major turning of the Gothic tradition that a woman brought about, a generation later? Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, in*[*1818*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Indexes/timeline.html#1818)*, made the Gothic novel over into what today we call science fiction. Frankenstein brought a new sophistication to literary terror, and it {92} did so without a heroine, without even an important female victim. Paradoxically, however, no other Gothic work by a woman writer, perhaps no literary work of any kind by a woman, better repays examination in the light of the sex of its author. For Frankenstein is a birth myth, and one that was lodged in the novelist's imagination, I am convinced, by the fact that*[*she was herself a mother*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Crit/bio.html)*.*

*Much in Mary Shelley's life was remarkable. She was the daughter of a brilliant mother (*[*Mary Wollstonecraft*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Wollston/wollston.html)*) and father (*[*William Godwin*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Godwin/godwin.html)*). She was the mistress and then wife of the poet*[*Shelley*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/PShelley/pshelley.html)*. She read widely in five languages, including Latin and Greek. She had easy access to the writings and conversation of some of the most original minds of her age. But nothing so sets her apart from the generality of writers of her own time, and before, and for long afterward, than her early and chaotic experience, at the very time she became an author, with motherhood. Pregnant at sixteen, and almost constantly pregnant throughout the following five years; yet not a secure mother, for she lost most of her babies soon after they were born; and not a lawful mother, for she was not married -- not at least when, at the age of eighteen, Mary Godwin began to write Frankenstein. So are monsters born.*

*What in fact has the experience of giving birth to do with women's literature? In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries relatively few important women writers bore children; most of them, in England and America, were spinsters and virgins. With the coming of Naturalism late in the century, and the lifting of the Victorian taboo against writing about physical sexuality (including pregnancy and labor), the subject of birth was first brought to literature in realistic form by the male novelists, from Tolstoy and Zola to William Carlos Williams. Tolstoy was the father of thirteen babies born at home; Williams, as well as a poet and a Naturalist, was a small-town doctor with hundreds of deliveries to his professional credit, and thus well equipped to write the remarkable account of a birth that opens The White Mule. For knowledge of the sort that makes half a dozen pages of obstetrical detail, they had the advantage over woman writers until relatively recent times.*[*1*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Articles/moers.html#1)

*{93} Mary Shelley was a unique case, in literature as in life. She brought birth to fiction not as realism but as Gothic fantasy, and thus contributed to*[*Romanticism*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/romantic.html)*a myth of genuine originality: the mad scientist who locks himself in his laboratory and secretly, guiltily works at creating human life, only to find that he has made a monster.*

[*It was on a dreary night of November*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1818v1/f1401.html)*, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. . . . The rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. . . . His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing . . . but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same color as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.*

*That is very good horror, but what follows is more horrid still: Frankenstein, the scientist, runs away and abandons the newborn monster, who is and remains nameless. Here, I think, is where Mary Shelley's book is most interesting, most powerful, and most feminine: in the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences. Most of the novel, roughly two of its three volumes, can be said to deal with the retribution visited upon monster and creator for deficient infant care. Frankenstein seems to be distinctly a*[*woman's mythmaking*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Crit/gender.html)*on the subject of birth precisely because its emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth.*

*Fear and guilt, depression and anxiety are commonplace reactions to the birth of a baby, and well within the normal range of experience. But more deeply rooted in our cultural mythology, and certainly in our literature, are the happy maternal reactions: the ecstasy, the sense of fulfillment, and the rush of nourishing love which sweep over the new mother when she first holds her baby in her arms. Thackeray's treatment of the birth of a baby in Vanity Fair is the classic of this genre: gentle Amelia is pregnant when her adored young husband dies on the field of Waterloo, a tragedy which drives the young woman into a state of comatose grief until the blessed {94} moment when her baby is born. "Heaven had sent her consolation," writes Thackeray. "A day came -- of almost terrified delight and wonder -- when the poor widowed girl pressed a child upon her breast . . . a little boy, as beautiful as a cherub. . . . Love, and hope, and prayer woke again in her bosom. . . . She was safe."*

*Thackeray was here recording a reality, as well as expressing a sentiment. But he himself was under no illusion that happiness was the only possible maternal reaction to giving birth, for his own wife had become depressed and hostile after their first baby was born, and suicidal after the last; at the time of Vanity Fair, Thackeray had already had to place her in a sanitarium, and he was raising their two little girls himself. So, in Vanity Fair, he gives us not only Amelia as a mother, but also Becky Sharp. Becky's cold disdain toward her infant son, her hostility and selfishness as a mother, are perhaps a legacy of Thackeray's experience; they are among the finest things in the novel.*

*From what we know about the strange young woman who wrote Frankenstein, Mary Shelley was in this respect nothing like Becky Sharp. She rejoiced at becoming a mother and loved and cherished her babies as long as they lived. But her journal, which has set the tone of most of the discussion of the genesis of Frankenstein, is a chilly and laconic document in which the overwhelming emphasis is not on her maternity but on the extraordinary*[*reading program*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/MShelley/reading.html)*she put herself through at Shelley's side. Mary Shelley is said -- and rightly -- to have absorbed into Frankenstein the ideas about education, society, and morality held by*[*her father*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Godwin/godwin.html)*and*[*her mother*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Wollston/wollston.html)*. She is shown to have been influenced directly by Shelley's genius, and by her reading of*[*Coleridge*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Coleridg/coleridg.html)*and*[*Wordsworth*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Wordswor/wordswor.html)*and the*[*Gothic novelists*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/gothic.html)*. She learned from*[*Sir Humphry Davy*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Davy/davy.html)*'s book on*[*chemistry*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/chemist.html)*and*[*Erasmus Darwin*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Darwin/darwin.html)*on*[*biology*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/bio.html)*. In*[*Switzerland*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Places/switz.html)*, the summer she began Frankenstein, she sat by while Shelley,*[*Byron*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Byron/byron.html)*, and*[*Polidori*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Polidori/polidori.html)*discussed the new sciences of mesmerism,*[*electricity*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/electric.html)*, and*[*galvanism*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/galvani.html)*, which promised to unlock the riddle of life, and planned to write ghost stories.*

*Mary Shelley herself was the first to point to her fortuitous immersion in the literary and scientific revolutions of her day as the source of Frankenstein. Her extreme youth, as well as her sex, have contributed to the generally held opinion that she was not so much an author in her own right as a transparent medium through which passed the ideas of those around her. "All Mrs. Shelley did," writes Mario Praz, "was to provide a passive reflection of some of the wild fantasies which were living in the air about her."*

*Passive reflections, however, do not produce original works of literature, and Frankenstein, if not a great novel, was unquestionably an original one. The major Romantic and minor Gothic tradition to which it should have belonged was to the literature of the overreacher: the super -- {95} man who breaks through normal human limitations to defy the rules of society and infringe upon the realm of God. In the*[*Faust*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/faust.html)*story, hypertrophy of the individual will is symbolized by a pact with the devil. Byron's and Balzac's heroes; the rampaging monks of*[*Mat Lewis*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/lewis.html)*and E. T. A. Hoffmann; the*[*Wandering Jew*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/wander.html)*and Melmoth the wanderer; the chained and unchained*[*Prometheus*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Contexts/prometh.html)*: all are overreachers, all are punished by their own excesses -- by a surfeit of sensation, of experience, of knowledge and, most typically, by the doom of eternal life.*

*But Mary Shelley's overreacher is different. Frankenstein's exploration of the forbidden boundaries of human science does not cause the prolongation and extension of his own life, but the creation of a new one. He defies mortality not by living forever, but by giving birth. That this original twist to an old myth should have been the work of a young woman who was also a young mother seems to me, after all, not a very surprising answer to*[*the question*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1831v1/fint01.html)*that, according to Mary Shelley herself, was asked from the start: "How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?"*

*Birth is a hideous thing in Frankenstein, even before there is a monster. For Frankenstein's procedure, once he has determined to create new life, is to frequent the vaults and charnel houses and study the human corpse in all its loathsome stages of decay and decomposition. "*[*To examine the causes of life*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1818v1/f1303.html)*," he says, "we must first have recourse to death." His purpose is to "*[*bestow animation upon lifeless matter*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1818v1/f1306.html)*," so that he might "in the process of time renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption." Frankenstein collects bones and other human parts from the slaughterhouse and the dissecting room, and through long months of feverish and guilty activity sticks them together in a frame of gigantic size in what he calls "my workshop of filthy creation."*

*It is in her journal and her letters that Mary Shelley reveals the workshop of her own creation, where she pieced together the materials for a new species of romantic mythology. They record a horror story of maternity of the kind that literary biography does not provide again until Sylvia Plath.*

*As far as I can figure out, she was pregnant, barely pregnant but aware of the fact, when at the age of sixteen she ran off with Shelley in July*[*1814*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Indexes/timeline.html#1814)*. Also pregnant at the same time was Shelley's legal wife*[*Harriet*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/hshelley.html)*, who gave birth in November "to*[*a son and possible heir*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/wshelley.html)*," as Mary noted in her journal. In February 1815 Mary gave birth to a daughter, illegitimate, premature, and sickly. There is nothing in the journal about domestic help or a nurse in attendance. Mary notes that she breast-fed the baby; that*[*Fanny*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/fimlay.html)*, her half sister, came to call; that*[*Claire Clairmont*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/claire.html)*, her stepsister, who had run off with Mary, kept Shelley amused.*[*Bonaparte*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/napoleon.html)*invaded*[*France*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Places/france.html)*, the journal tells us, and Mary took up her incessant*[*reading*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/MShelley/reading.html)*{96} program: this time,*[*Mme de Staël*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/People/stael.html)*'s Corinne. The baby died in March. "Find my baby dead," Mary wrote. "A miserable day."*

*In April*[*1815*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Indexes/timeline.html#1815)*she was pregnant again, about eight weeks after the birth of her first child. In January*[*1816*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Indexes/timeline.html#1816)*she gave birth to a son: more breastfeeding, more reading. In March, Claire Clairmont sought out Lord Byron and managed to get herself pregnant by him within a couple of weeks. This pregnancy would be a subject of embarrassment and strain to Mary and Shelley, and it immediately changed their lives, for Byron left England in April, and Claire, Shelley, Mary, and her infant pursued him to Switzerland in May. There is nothing yet in Mary's journal about a servant, but a good deal about mule travel in the mountains. In June they all settled near Byron on the shores of*[*Lake Geneva*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Places/geneva.html)*.*

*In June 1816, also, Mary began Frankenstein. And during the year of its writing, the following events ran their swift and sinister course: in October Fanny Imlay, Mary's half sister, committed suicide after discovering that she was not Godwin's daughter but Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter by her American lover. (The suicide was not only a tragedy but an embarrassment to all. Godwin refused even to claim Fanny's body, which was thrown nameless into a pauper's grave.) In early December Mary was pregnant again, as she seems to have sensed almost the day it happened. (See her letter to Shelley of December 5, in which she also announced completion of Chapter 4 of her novel.) In mid-December Harriet Shelley drowned herself in the Serpentine; she was pregnant by someone other than Shelley. In late December Mary married Shelley. In January 1817 Mary wrote Byron that Claire had borne him a daughter. In May she finished Frankenstein, published the following year.*

*Death and birth were thus as hideously intermixed in the life of Mary Shelley as in Frankenstein's "workshop of filthy creation." Who can read without shuddering, and without remembering her myth of the birth of a nameless monster, Mary's journal entry of March 19, 1815, which records the trauma of her loss, when she was seventeen, of her first baby, the little girl who did not live long enough to be given a name. "Dream that my little baby came to life again," Mary wrote; "that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived. Awake and find no baby. I think about the little thing all day. Not in good spirits." ("*[*I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption.*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1818v1/f1306.html)*")*

*So little use has been made of this material by writers about Frankenstein that it may be worth emphasizing how important, because how unusual, was Mary Shelley's experience as a young woman writer. Though the death of one of their babies played a decisive role in the literary careers of both Harriet Beecher Stowe and Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, two of the rare Victorian women writers who were also mothers. both were about {97} twice Mary Shelley's age when their babies died; and both were respectably settled middle-class women, wives of ministers. The harum-scarum circumstances surrounding her maternity have no parallel until our time, which in its naïve cerebrations upon family life (and in much else, except genius) resembles the Shelley era. The young women novelists and poets of today who are finding in the trauma of inexperienced and unassisted motherhood a mine of troubled fantasy and black humor are on the lookout for Gothic predecessors, if the revival of The Yellow Wallpaper -- Charlotte Perkins Gilman's macabre post-partum fantasy -- is any indication. The newborn returns again to literature as monster.*

*At six months he grew big as six years  
. . . One day he swallowed  
Her whole right breast . . .  
        . . . both died,  
She inside him, curled like an embryo.*

*-- Cynthia Macdonald: "The Insatiable Baby"*

*Behind them all stands the original fantasy and the exceptional case of Mary Shelley. She hurtled into teen-age motherhood without any of the financial or social or familial supports that made bearing and rearing children a relaxed experience for the normal middle-class woman of her day (as Jane Austen, for example, described her). She was an unwed mother, responsible for breaking up a marriage of a young woman just as much a mother as she. The father whom she adored broke furiously with her when she eloped; and Mary Wollstonecraft, the mother whose memory she revered, and whose books she was rereading throughout her teen-age years, had died in childbirth -- died giving birth to Mary herself.*

*Surely no outside influence need be sought to explain Mary Shelley's fantasy of the newborn as at once monstrous agent of destruction and piteous victim of parental abandonment. "*[*I, the miserable and the abandoned*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1818v3/fwal15.html)*," cries the monster at the end of Frankenstein, "I am an abortion to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on. . . . I have murdered the lovely and the helpless. . . . I have devoted my creator to misery; I have pursued him even to that irremediable ruin."*

*In the century and a half since its publication, Frankenstein has spawned innumerable interpretations among the critics, and among the novelists, playwrights, and filmmakers who have felt its influence. The idea, though not the name, of the robot originated with Mary Shelley's novel, and her title character became a byword for the dangers of scientific knowledge. But the work has also been read as an existential fable; as a commentary on the cleavage between reason and feeling, in both philosophical thought and educational theory; as a parable of the excesses of idealism and genius; as a dramatization of the divided self; as an attack on {98} the stultifying force of social convention, including race prejudice, for Stephen Crane's The Monster must surely be counted among the most powerful descendants of Frankenstein.*

*The versatility of Mary Shelley's myth is due to the brilliance of her mind and the range of her learning, as well as to the influence of the circle in which she moved as a young writer. But Frankenstein was most original in its dramatization of dangerous oppositions through the struggle of a creator with monstrous creation. The sources of this Gothic conception, which still has power to "curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart," were surely the anxieties of a woman who, as daughter, mistress, and mother, was a bearer of death.*

*Robert Kiely's suggestive study of The Romantic Novel in England includes one of the rare serious discussions of Frankenstein as a woman's work. For Professor Kiely does more than interpret; he also responds, as one must in reading Frankenstein, to what he calls the "mundane side to this fantastic tale" [*[*p. 160*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Articles/kiely.html#par14)*]*

*In making her hero the creator of a monster, she does not necessarily mock idealistic ambition, but in making that monster a poor grotesque patchwork, a physical mess of seams and winkles, she introduces a consideration of the material universe which challenges and undermines the purity of idealism. In short, the sheer concreteness of the ugly thing which Frankenstein has created often makes his ambitions and his character -- however sympathetically described seem ridiculous and even insane. The arguments on behalf of idealism and unworldly genius are seriously presented, but the controlling perspective is that of an earthbound woman. [*[*p. 160*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Articles/kiely.html#par15)*]*

*The "mundane side" to Frankenstein is one of its most fertile and original aspects. Mary Shelley comes honestly to grips with the dilemma of a newly created human being, a giant adult male in shape, who must swiftly recapitulate, and without the assistance of his terrified parent, the infantile and adolescent stages of human development. She even faces squarely the monster's sexual needs, for the denouement of the story hangs on his demand that Frankenstein create a female monster partner, and Frankenstein's refusal to do so.*

*But more than mundane is Mary Shelley's concern with the emotions surrounding the parent-child and child-parent relationship. Here her intention to underline the birth myth in Frankenstein becomes most evident, quite apart from biographical evidence about its author. She provides an unusual thickening of the background of the tale with familial fact and fantasy, from the very opening of the story in the letters a brother addresses to his sister of whom he is excessively fond, because they are both orphans. There is Frankenstein's relationship to his doting parents, {98} and his semi-incestuous love for an abandoned, orphan girl brought up as his sister. There is the first of the monster's murder victims, Frankenstein's infant brother (precisely drawn, even to his name, after Mary Shelley's baby); and the innocent young girl wrongly executed for the infant's murder, who is also a victim of what Mary Shelley calls that "*[*strange perversity,"*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1818v1/f1503.html)*a mother's hatred. (Justine accepts guilt with docility: "'I almost began to think that I was the monster that my confessor said I was. . . .'" [*[*1.7.7*](http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/1818v1/f1707.html)*]) The material in Frankenstein about the abnormal, or monstrous, manifestations of the child-parent tie justifies, as much as does its famous monster, Mary Shelley's reference to the novel as "my hideous progeny."*

*What Mary Shelley actually did in Frankenstein was to transform the standard Romantic matter of incest, infanticide, and patricide into a phantasmagoria of the nursery. Nothing quite like it was done in English literature until that Victorian novel by a woman which we also place uneasily in the Gothic tradition: Wuthering Heights.*