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A Non-Normative Paradigm: Disability and Gender in Nineteenth-Century Gothic Literature

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

A NON-NORMATIVE PARADIGM: DISABILITY AND GENDER IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY GOTHIC LITERATURE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

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by

Malena Sol Pendola Biondi

2022

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Science and Education

This thesis, written by Malena Sol Pendola Biondi, and entitled A Non-Normative Paradigm: Disability and Gender in Nineteenth-Century Gothic Literature, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgement.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Florida International University, 2022

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
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by

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Florida International University, 2022

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Within nineteenth century society, normalcy is presented through unfeasible means of appearance and identity, leading to a rejection of the self. By exploring characters in Victorian Gothic literature who are marginalized by society, and invoking the work of Gail Weiss, Kim Hall, and others, this essay investigates the way these norms are immortalized through published representations and how they expose the lingering presence of rejection of disabled, queer, and gender-fluid bodies. Through the analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I look at the contextualization of marginalized existence compared to able-bodiedness and normalized gender to argue that the impacts of nonnormative representation are crucial for breaking these stereotypes. Through topics of historization, normalcy, disability aesthetics, gender, and sexuality, I find that normative realizations of appearance and identity are unattainable because they cannot be understood within the complexities that are born as constructs of society.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As a historical recollection of human ideals and trends, fiction has become a central tool for uncovering the cultural production of the past. Nineteenth-century Gothic fiction, specifically, has publicized and distributed perceptions of normalcy to create an ideological image and way of being. In another way, the construction of normalcy in these novels also exists to exclude and isolate differences instead of celebrating them, thus satisfying this internal need within society for comparing people. Lennard J. Davis discloses the origin of the word “normalcy” and its counterparts, revealing that they didn’t enter the English language until the mid-1800’s, the era I am focusing on (24). He acknowledges the word “normal” as “constituting, conforming to, not deviating or deferring from, the common type or standard, regular, usual” (qtd. in Davis 24). In addition, Robert McRuer discusses the contextualization of normative “able-bodiedness” in regard to disabilities and homosexuality in which the terms themselves define a normalcy that is considered less than normal. He says, “Yet the desire for definitional clarity might unleash more problems than it contains; if it’s hard to deny that something called normalcy exists, it’s even harder to pinpoint what that something is” (McRuer 371). “Normal,” thus, will never be a well-defined word, it can’t be because no two people are ever going to be the same, not physically, emotionally, in sexuality, or in appearances. That is why the creature in Shelley’s book is so feared, but so consuming as well. Even though he presents “normal” body parts that function “free from physical disability” (qtd. in McRuer 371), they are not seen as normal because they look different;

they're a different color, they're bigger, etc., things that people are marginalized for every day in modern society.

The Victorian era is well known for being England's greatest period of societal harmony due to its morality and social customs, which prioritized class. Social standards regarding disability, appearance, gender norms, and sexuality were very prejudiced in nineteenth-century society because they "failed to take account of the realities of human nature" (Altick 177), ignoring and demonizing aspects of people that were not destructive or negatively impactful. Men and women inhabited two separate spheres in which men excelled in logic and independence, while women were better in tune with emotions and submission. These gender roles, however, caused confusion for men regarding their sexuality. While it was socially unacceptable for women to enjoy sex, and men gravitated towards the same gender, homosexuality was considered a mental illness and a crime, demonstrating the influence of social values on other areas of life, in this case extending to mental health and legality. Charles E. Rosenberg, describing the "male ethos" in America, says that "despite a superfluity of evangelical exhortation, the primary role model with which men had to come to terms was that which articulated the archaic male ethos - one in which physical vigor, and particularly aggressive sexual behavior was a central component" (Rosenberg 137). This idea forced a singular option for gender-based behaviors and preferences, deeming those that rebelled against the norm as sick or illegal, often constricted to a suffocating prison of norms.

This is also about the same time that social Darwinism became a factor in how society deemed who is weak and who is strong, categorizing and marginalizing groups of

people according to a myth of cultural and genetic dominance. When creating social hierarchies, subjugation was “more important than merely asserting that subjugated ones are inferior, the subjugator is really boldly asserting his or her need to maintain others in inferior role” (Dennis 249), emphasizing the ways in which the Other was, and continues to be, belittled and mistreated. This was also evidenced in the way physical or mental disabilities were hidden and segregated. Cindy Lacom notes that “people with disabilities and deformities were displayed next to England’s colonized ‘savages, in carnivals and ‘freak shows’” and “those unable to meet industrial workplace standards because of a disability or deformity were increasingly exiled from the capitalist norm” (548). Individuals who would fall outside of the strict, classist guidelines of society were marginalized and oppressed, ultimately threatening their livelihood and social lives, correlating with a doctrine known as the Ugly Law, “a name that captures both the ‘unsightly’ people the law intended to address and the nastiness of the law itself, this ordinance made it illegal for people with physical disabilities to appear in public [...]” (Coco 23). Mandates like these demonstrate evidence of how this era enforced and normalized discrimination, so far as to enact a law with a derogatory title.

Within Gothic literature, readers are introduced to various characters who are victims of the norms dictated by nineteenth-century society; they are marginalized as different from “normal”. This thesis explores disability aesthetics, the contextualization of queer and disabled existence when compared to able-bodiedness, and gender in terms of social and cultural contingent norms of appearance. My argument focuses on two Gothic texts: Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian*

Gray, texts emerging at opposite ends of the nineteenth century, to demonstrate the perseverance of these societal standards. This allows us to further understand how these norms imply a familiarity with the abnormal, and to illustrate the impacts that non-normative representations have on society. I suggest that Gothic literature is an ideal field to expose the long presence of societal rejection of disabled bodies and the overwhelming pressure of perfection within gender-specific and able-bodied boundaries. While other scholars have studied Gothic literature through similar frames, they haven't combined them into a nonnormative focus. I will observe Gothic literature's contributions to nonnormative existence and argue for its representational importance and immortality in exposing esoteric standards of being. Reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a novel that represented the overturning of norms for science, humanity, philosophy, and gender in its time, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which takes for its subject the corruption of the soul by beauty and art, I acknowledge the contextualization of queer and disabled existence in both texts to emphasize the issues with the refusal of disability, gender identities that oppose gender norms, and queerness within society, while considering the time period as context for the social stigmas in place and determine their importance to the themes of these texts.

II. DISABILITY AND APPEARANCE

Regarding elements of difference between all people, ranging from biological deformities, learning debilities, or simply "unpopular" features, disability is targeted in its nonnormative existence. Because the majority of society share similarities in appearance and able-bodiedness, any slight difference generates a margin in which the Other might

find themselves excluded, shamed, or with a completely destroyed self-esteem, as we witness our characters experience. Reading Gothic literature with a disability studies lens exposes how society problematizes disabled existence. In her article, “Disability and Representation,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson reveals how disability, seen in terms of advertisement and narratives, reinterprets its definition through representation. She notes that “ability and disability are not so much a matter of capacities and limitations of bodies but more about what we expect from a body at a particular moment and place [...] we are expected to look, act, and move in certain ways so we’ll fit into the built and attitudinal environment. If we don’t, we become disabled” (524). With Garland-Thomson’s definition in mind, disability is contingent on the meaning of norms. Whoever falls out of the ideal is therefore different and not sufficiently evolved enough to complement their surroundings. Being in a minority often leads to exclusion, representational identity issues, and powers a dangerous hierarchy. The Gothic novels I will be discussing are examples of how narratives reimagine and include a disabled presence into the majority, often making them memorable because of their disabilities.

Disability represents a multifaceted perspective on the definition of abled-bodiedness, not only what we are able to do with our bodies, but with our minds as well. If your mind is not sane, not advanced, not age-appropriate, it is disabled. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* presents an interesting claim in the discussion of disability. Frankenstein’s creature, a mere child, is born matured. He was not born an infant who grew into his adult body; he stood tall over his own father since the moment he was created. Martha Stoddard Holmes says “He is a ‘born adult,’ a recurrent theme in narratives of ‘artificial

people' [...] While the animation scene and the developmental events that follow invite us to compare the Creature's experience to the trajectory of a rejected and abandoned child, [...] the novel's focus shifts to the question of what to do with a socially problematic and uncontrollable adult" (373). The creature is thus rejected from society, first for being an adult with the mind of child, and then for becoming an adult with a far superior intellect and strength, and therefore, uncontrollable. It is ironic to note this notion of knowledge, or lack thereof, in a creature whose body supports the conceptions of his brain because, although the Creature gained knowledge to be able to join the rest of society, it is Victor who actually expresses the dangers of uncontrollable knowledge. In the fourth letter, Walton writes, "One man's life or death were but a small price to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought, for the dominion I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race." (Shelley 16). As an uncanny parallel of Victor, in which Walton possesses the same thirst for knowledge and power in his explorations, and followed by Victor's influence on him, Walton is demonstrating just how powerful and dangerous the desire for knowledge can be. In retrospect, it is Victor who possesses the mind of an uncontrollable adult, yet the Creature is rejected for his prepubescent, then mature, mind. However, the Creature, after his misgivings, eventually requests a creature like him to separate himself from the society that has excluded him, revealing a mental sanity to accept his rejection. Holmes adds "the Creature's demand for a mate 'as hideous as myself' suggests how fully the Creature has learned the values of a society that has difficulty envisioning – or perhaps acknowledging – certain kinds of difference as desired" (374-375). Holmes' observation further emphasizes society's

values during this time. The Creature learned what the ideals of society were and that he would never be accepted if they remained in place.

Under a parent-child dynamic, Victor Frankenstein and the Creature parallel the experiences a parent can go through after the birth of a child as a metaphor for the incorporation of the Other into society; the child being the Other and the family being society. Often, parents will gladly welcome their offspring, regardless of how they come, but Victor does no such thing. The Creature had exclaimed,

Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I am solitary and abhorred. (Shelley 88)

In his comparison of himself and Victor to the Adam and God of the Bible, the Creature emphasizes Victor's neglect of his child. He not only alludes to Victor's own allusion of playing God, but how his power of creation has left the Creature more "solitary and abhorred" than Satan, who had followers, thus a society that accepted him.

As a subcategory under disability, deformities, or simply non-ideal features, often have the same outcomes within society. Although deformities don't explicitly reference functions, they can include impairments that are visible and not considered aesthetic, such as having a hunchback or clubfeet. Essaka Joshua references several sources when she tries to define deformity in her book chapter titled "Picturesque Aesthetics: Theorising Deformity in the Romantic Era." While philosophers like Hume narrow it

down to a feeling of dissatisfaction, others like Hartley acknowledge that the difficulties linked with deformity are directly correlated to the social context (Joshua 31) that is, appropriate to the atmosphere they reside in. Hartley's definition of deformity thus correlates well with Garland-Thomson's definition of disability, acknowledging that these non-ideal factors are often contingent on societal popularity and representation. In *Frankenstein* and *Dorian Gray*, we encounter characters who do not fit the aesthetic norm of nineteenth-century ideals, in one way or another, suggesting their real-life implications and social consequences.

Frankenstein lends itself to the reading of a creation made from various human body parts that can be studied regarding disability aesthetics and appearance, gathering that the creature's exterior has evoked a memorable reaction throughout the novel's life. In her text, Shelley describes the creature through Victor Frankenstein's eyes, saying

“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; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips” (34).

The creature's abnormality terrifies even its creator in order to evoke a specific emotion from the audience, knowing that making him look different and intimidating will incite horror, but also remain a memorable image for its differences. In ‘Visualizing the Monstrous Frankenstein Films,’ Caroline Joan (“Kay”) S. Picart explores the

“Frankenstein complex” saying “Even more significantly, the ‘monstrosity’ of the creature’s body lies not simply, as Judith Halberstam argues, in its functioning as a ‘machine that, in its Gothic mode, produces meaning and can represent any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative’ (21). Though there is a malleability that characterizes the depiction of monstrosity, there are also certain parameters within which that monstrosity can either be tamed and rendered sympathetic or hyperbolized and demonized” (Picart 18). In support of this, Michael Berube’s article “Disability and Narrative” discusses disability representation in literary narrative, as well as film, going over multiple stories in which, he states:

It is altogether queer that disability studies might suggest that the literary representation of disability *not* be read as the site of the figural. And yet scholars in disability studies are right to point out that literary representations of people with disabilities often serve to mobilize pity or horror in a moral drama that has nothing to do with the actual experience of disability. (Berube 570)

In the case of *Frankenstein*, it is the sight of the abnormal that terrifies Victor Frankenstein and anyone else who sees the creature. This includes the fact that the creature was shunned by his own creator/father instantly after coming to life, inciting pity for the Creature. In fact, anyone who came close to the Creature reacted similarly. The Creature even goes as far to note that

These thoughts exhilarated me and led me to apply with fresh ardour to the acquiring the art of language. My organs were indeed harsh, but supple; and although my voice was very unlike the soft music of their tones, yet I pronounced

such words as I understood with tolerable ease. It was as the ass and the lap-dog; yet surely the gentle ass whose intentions were affectionate, although his manners were rude, deserved better treatment than blows and execration. (Shelley 77)

He notes this when seeking acceptance from the De Lacey family in the cottage, only to be attacked by those he had felt close to and had learned from. By comparing himself to the ass in the fable of the ass and the lap-dog, he argues that the ass' treatment is unacceptable, further acknowledging his difference from others in society based on his appearance, despite his good intentions.

Backtracking to the Creature's appearance, Tobin Siebers, in "Disability Aesthetics," emphasizes the position and great influence that disability has had on art and society. He states:

Disability intercedes to make the differences between good and bad art – and not as one would initially expect. Good art incorporates disability. Beauty always maintains an underlying sense of disability, and increasing this sense over time may actually renew works of art that risk to fall out of fashion because of changing standards of taste. It is often the presence of disability that allows the beauty of an artwork to endure. (Siebers 543)

Literature deserves the same aesthetic acknowledgment that art such as paintings and sculptures receive, especially considering how memorable some classics of literature are. For instance, the creature in *Frankenstein* has been recognized as a classic through film adaptations which have adopted the creature's story and appearance. These aspects are what allow the story to be recognized for these disabilities. Within Sieber's observations,

disability, the presentation of difference, is what entices audiences and allows them to recognize beauty within difference. It is why Victor Frankenstein becomes obsessed with the creature and why Dorian becomes obsessed with his flawed picture.

Further, in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we deal with an increasing number of standard beauty appropriations in opposition to a picture that suffers injuries and age. In the novel, Dorian thinks "What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty and eat away its grace. They would defile it and make it shameful. And yet the thing would still live on. It would be always alive" (Wilde 273). Although Dorian sees his painting with all its deformities, consequences, and determines that his sins would "mar its beauty and eat away its grace," he is still mesmerized more and more by the same painting because of its nonnormative appearance, more so than when the painting was young and, by social standards, beautiful. In fact, Gail Weiss, in "The 'Normal Abnormalities' of Disability and Aging: Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir," discusses how age and disability have more often than not been used to divide people in a dehumanizing way, regardless of different cultural aesthetics and how they constitute old age and disability. In this, she states something that could have been written for Dorian himself:

For, if a normal subject is someone who is immune to the effects of aging and to the possibility of experiencing profound bodily alternations in appearance and function, then the normal subject himself (and it is almost always a 'he,' is it not?) a chimera who preserves his normalcy by refusing to acknowledge the bodily

vulnerabilities without which he would have no access to the wonders of the world. (Weiss 215)

Normalcy, in the passage above, is mainly acknowledging that in this particular instance normalcy is equivalent to immortality, whereas in reality, it is not. So, if we compare Dorian's "refus[al] to acknowledge the bodily vulnerabilities" (Weiss 215) to the socially accepted concept of normalcy, then Dorian Gray, despite his normal appearance on the outside, was not normal because he did not truly fit into the mold of the majority, because he did not age. While Weiss regards a hypothetical in which a normal subject is immune to the effects of aging, most of society, therefore the norm, does age. By preserving himself, and accumulating years onto his portrait, Dorian negated everything natural about the human body to achieve an aesthetic that was boring. His portrait, exhibiting years of experiences, was far more interesting and beautiful than a young face with nothing to show for his immortality.

Dorian's picture possessed many of the disabilities and deformities that he escaped from, but apart from normal deteriorations of age, many deformities that touch the painting are caused by Dorian's misdeeds, implying an equivalence between disability and immorality. Despite Dorian's horrible demeanor towards others, his body remained able-bodied and young. In Dominic Manganiello article "Ethics and Aesthetics in The Picture of Dorian Gray," he discusses the effects of substituting an ethical conscience with an aesthetic one, highlighting Lord Henry as a key figure in the transformation of conscience. He notes "Dorian is fascinated not only by Lord Henry's attempt to substitute an aesthetic for an ethical conscience, but also by the power of the

language in which this substitution is couched” (Manganiello 28). Lord Henry’s role in the novel seems to serve as a catalyst for many of the moments that seem to pass, and he can be recognized as an artist or creator himself in this world of aesthetics as he molds Dorian into a kind of utterance of himself. Lord Henry states:

To project one’s soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment; to hear one’s own intellectual views echoed back to one with all the added music of passion and youth; to convey one’s temperament into another as though it were a subtle fluid or a strange perfume: there was a real joy in that perhaps the most satisfying joy left to us in an age so limited and vulgar as our own, an age grossly carnal in its pleasures, and grossly common in its aims. (Wilde 179)

The passage above explores the act of Lord Henry projecting himself and his lifestyle onto Dorian. In this account, Lord Henry has created his own art through Dorian’s impressionable figure further extending onto the painting itself. Manganiello goes on to note that “By creating Dorian in his own image and likeness, Lord Henry engages in a linguistic narcissism, and his word-painting becomes as much as Basil Hallward’s portrait a magical mirror of Dorian’s soul” (28). In this indulgence, Dorian begins to regard Lord Henry as a sort of guide for his new pleasure-seeking lifestyle he has embarked upon, in which the ethical conscience is put aside, that is until Dorian is faced with the sins he committed when realizing that the art may have just kept a corner of its artist’s subconscious, or maybe his soul. The portrait keeps him accountable for the sins he committed by showing him the consequences he could have confronted. In fact,

Michael Patrick Gillespie discusses this further in regard to the Aesthetic Movement in his article, "Ethics and Aesthetics in The Picture of Dorian Gray," where he states:

At first glance, art for art's sake may seem a direct rejection of morality in favour of pleasure, but the Aesthetic Movement in fact took a far more complex view of the relationship between the two. Rather than denying a place for ethics within an aesthetic experience (the either/or choice), it instead denied primacy to conventional value systems and bluntly asserted the validity of alternative moralities (the both/and alternative). (Gillepsie 142)

However, in this case, it is viable to consider Wilde's use of morality against aesthetics as a story warning against the Aesthetic Movement, cautioning against the moralistic interpretations it imposes on those surrounded by beauty. By translating morality onto bodily aestheticism, Wilde's novel could be interpreted as commentary for society's intolerance of disabilities, corresponding disabilities with the sins of mankind.

Furthermore, in a comparison and further acknowledgment of the rejection of disabled characters, Wilde attributes a similar acknowledgment of the rejection of these characters by society when he attributes the following opinion to Dorian Gray:

Society, civilized society at least, is never very ready to believe anything to the detriment of those who are both rich and fascinating. [...] For the canons of good society are, or should be, the same as the canons of art. Form is absolutely essential to it. It should have the dignity of a ceremony, as well as its unreality, and should combine the insincere character of a romantic play with the wit and

beauty that make such plays delightful to us. Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities. (300)

These comments point out the cruel reality and codes by which society functions. Despite Dorian Gray's crude approach to everyone he meets, and his lack of ethical and moral codes, society gladly accepts him due to his aesthetic appearance, wealth, and position in the social hierarchy. Holmes states that, in *Frankenstein*, the Creature's "condition of disability and resulting social exclusion are [...] purely aesthetic in nature, and as such, socially constructed in the absence of any impairment or distinguishing difficulty in physical function..." (376-378). Ultimately, the Creature, who experiences feelings of sympathy, anguish, regret, sadness, all aligned with his moral code, is violently attacked and rejected from a society that produced him, yet Dorian, who unapologetically hurts and murders people is gladly accepted into high society, all reactions simply based on appearances.

III. GENDER AND QUEERNESS

Regarding gender, I will look at how genders are determined within nineteenth-century social values, and how gender blurring was established through Gothic texts, as subtle as they may appear. In addition, I will address and connect the interchangeability of gender roles within these characters to their possible queerness. Drawing from both Queer Studies and Disability Studies, I define "queer" as both a socially produced identity, as well as a way of reading. In her theory of "Imitation and Gender Subordination," Judith Butler establishes the destabilization of gender and sexual identity

when realizing that the imitations of both have no original, therefore fail to reproduce any ideal category for each. She says

The “reality” of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and the ground of all imitations. In other words, heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself—and failing. (Butler 313).

Eve Sedgwick also agrees with Butler in her theory regarding limited sexuality. In “Tendencies,” Sedgwick mentions that queer can refer to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (8), meaning that to limit sexuality to a controlled binary system is simply too naïve and confines society to a uniform freedom and understanding. The significance of queer is then much more complicated as there is no such thing as a stable sexual identity, emphasizing the transformative power of the word. Furthermore, in agreement with Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant’s and Michael Warner’s “Sex in Public” recognize that heterosexuality is not monolithic, but it attains hegemony through the compartmentalization of sex, linking heterosexual intimacy to public spaces and further elaborating on modern public discourse as destructive to the queer world. For them, the word “queer” is defined or mediated by performances in the built environment. They mention that

[B]y making sex seem irrelevant or merely personal, heteronormative conventions of intimacy block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures.

Finally, those conventions conjure a mirage: a home base of prepolitical humanity from which citizens are thought to come into political discourse and to which they are expected to return in the (always imaginary) future after political conflict.

(Berlant and Warner, 553)

Disregarding the privileges of the heterosexual society, it is important to create more available forms of erotic lives being established by counterpublics, who may not identify as queer while “elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation” (Berlant and Warner 558). Finally, in his theory of compulsory able-bodiedness, Robert McRuer shows how “queer” is also a category of disability. He states that “the system of compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness, that—in fact—compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and vice versa.” McRuer’s definition reminds us of just how limitless the word “queer” is. While queerness is generally recognized as a non-heteronormative sexual attraction, I will use it here with the narrative’s own queerness in mind and its social implications in order to reimagine its persistence for the characters.

In terms of gender and gender contextualization, both texts are very fluid with standards of masculinity and femininity. Mary Shelley grew up resembling many characteristics of her mother, despite Mary Wollstonecraft’s death giving birth to her daughter. She then spent years reading the feminist work her mother wrote. She did not give significance to the differences, psychological or physical, of genders and the roles society deemed fit for each. It is important to recall Kim Q. Hall’s keyword essay on

gender, where she discusses the difference between gender and sex, as well as the existing structures of gender that promote oppression. In her essay, she states that “Embodying ‘normate’ (Garland-Thomson 2011) gender, for example, requires having a body whose appearance and capacity are in conformity with dominant gender norms [...] (Hall 91). “Reconfiguring” is a keyword in these lines as it is the definitions we give to words that give them their power, just like how society defines what normal means. With that being said, even Victor Frankenstein, a man, reveals many feminine aspects that would often “emasculate” him and it is in those moments of feeling less masculine that his femininity sparks. From the moment the Creature opens his eyes, Victor fled at the sight of him instead of taking responsibility for the life he created.

I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed: when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch -- the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed down stairs. I took refuge in the courtyard belonging to the house which I inhabited; where I remained during the rest of the night, walking up and down in the greatest agitation, listening attentively, catching and fearing each sound as if it were to announce the approach of the demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life. (Shelley 34-35)

In this, Victor recounts the terror he felt when he was greeted by his creation, but he also notices that the creature smiled at him when he says, “while a grin wrinkled his cheeks”. A smile is usually welcoming and warm, so why did he flee? I am not suggesting that femininity is equivalent to cowardliness, as gender roles, like normalcy, are a social construct. Instead, I am considering nineteenth-century society’s gender values to make these claims. In a moment where Victor had to prove himself as a parent, as a man, he was prejudiced and feeble, hiding from a creation he should have protected. Victor’s masculinity is absent in the presence of a moral situation, not only in terms of courage, but in terms of responsibility and judgement.

In her article, “Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, and the Spectacle of Masculinity,” Bette London discusses the novel’s theatrical portrayal of masculinity by giving light to the contradictions underneath the masculine authority oddly found in Shelley’s novel and its purpose. She states, “Mary’s iconic representation, then, quite literally supports a scene of male self-display” (London 255), alluding to her lack of autonomy as a woman in the 1800’s. Not only does Shelley expose the myth of generated gender roles and her frustrations, but she uses Victor to emphasize her emotions so that they would be heard because they are emerging from a man, in turn also criticizing societal gender roles. In fact, in “Gender Represented in the Gothic Novel,” Asmat Nabi explains the characteristics that make up the Female Gothic and the Male Gothic, further arguing that female distinctiveness is critical to Gothic literature. Nabi notes that “Ellen Moers also considers [the Female Gothic] ‘as a coded expression of women’s fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body.’ Women thus felt imprisoned in the

household and in their own body, a feeling that they covertly tried to convey through female Gothic literature” (Nabi 75). I argue that many of Mary Shelley’s anxieties stemming from being a woman in the early 1800’s is revealed through her mainly male characters. In many aspects of the novel in which Victor is faced with something fearful, like meeting his creation, he runs away disgusted with the yellow skin of his offspring. The many instances that the creature attempts to meet his parent, Victor flees and even tries to forget him. However, when the Creature kills Victor’s little brother and demands a wife from Victor, Victor is filled with hysteria and guilt from not being able to take responsibility for what he’s done and how he behaved. In her article, Colleen Hobbs goes over how Shelley establishes gender roles in *Frankenstein* through Victor’s female afflictions. She discusses how Victor’s upbringing did not allow him access to his feminine side, causing him to act hysterically when faced with a situation in which he would have to prove his masculinity. She states, “In depicting Victor's response to the complications raised by his monster, Shelley attributes a classically female malady to a male character; simultaneously, she produces a site where orthodox gender stereotypes are revealed as inadequate, dangerous constructions” (Hobbs 152). In this, it is interesting to note how Victor Frankenstein establishes an outlet for Shelley not only as criticism of herself, but of societal gender roles as well.

Shelley’s character maps this intersection and the difficulties raised when the boundaries of gender are transgressed. A consideration of the complaint Shelley calls ‘insanity, not of the understanding but of the heart,’ can sharpen our

perception not only of her character's actions, but also of the author's commentary on the origins of depravity and monstrosity [...] (Hobbs 152). Through Victor, Shelley uses societal gender roles to reveal, not only the blurring between female and male roles, but also the female angsts and oppressions of the nineteenth century to reimagine female representation.

Likewise, the same context is valid for queerness, in which it is deemed different from the staple, "normal" sexuality which includes being attracted to the opposite sex and following your gender's designated gender roles. There were often rumors or assumptions about Oscar Wilde's homosexuality, which some argue can be seen exposed in his texts. Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray* sometime before the Wilde Trials of 1895 where Wilde was accused of sodomy. In turn, these ongoing trials caused London to contemplate the criminality of homosexuality. In his article, 'Silent Homosexuality in Oscar Wilde's *Teleny* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*,' Antonio Sanna mentions that in this era, homosexuals "became a judicial subject of law, a problem for morality and ... a target of law and of public opinions" (22), further revealing how the Other is often criminalized if they differ from societal ideals; in other words, if they stray from the majority.

An example of Wilde's repressed sexuality can be seen in his novel. Although Dorian Gray was dramatic, obsessed with his looks, and loved the theatre, which can all be considered tropes under the feminine gender norms, he dated Sibyl, a female actress. As infatuated and enamored with Sibyl as Dorian was through the beginning of their relationship, he mentions "I loved you because you were marvelous, because you had

genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art” (Wilde 236-237). He was enchanted by her performance, the kind of art that encapsulates what is fake. However, Dorian was quick to shut his emotions off and leave Sibyl after her performance didn’t give him the same satisfaction he craved from her, revealing his love for theatre and aesthetics as being greater than his love for Sibyl, if it even initially existed. In his article, McRuer mentions that

[t]he emphasis on identities that are constituted through repetitive performances is even more central to compulsory able-bodiedness [...] as with heterosexuality, this repetition is bound to fail, as the ideal able-bodied identity can never, once and for all, be achieved. (McRuer 304)

By dating Sibyl, it was as if Dorian was imitating this performance of heteronormativity, but despite these efforts, he was still a man who exhibited queer and opposing gender role tendencies.

In addition, Dorian’s relationship with Sibyl was also based on her act in a way that allowed her a performance of the opposing gender. Within her theatrical representations, Sibyl performs in cross-dress, where she dresses like a man to conform to masculine roles like Rosalind and Imogen. In fact, Dorian emphasizes his fascination with Sibyl by saying “You should have seen her! When she came on in her boy’s clothes, she was perfectly wonderful. She wore a moss-coloured velvet jerkin with cinnamon sleeves, slim, brown, cross-gartered hose, a dainty little green cap with a hawk’s feather caught in a jewel, and a hooded cloak lined with dull red. She had never seemed to me more exquisite” (Wilde 224). By obsessing over her look as a man, Dorian expresses a

fluidity within his sexuality, emphasizing a desire for what is beautiful, in this case, Sibyl's expression as a man. Marjorie Gerber provides an analysis of cross-dressing fetishes where she says "Why is fixation on the penis [...] not called a fetish when it is attached to a man? The concept of 'normal' sexuality, that is to say, of heterosexuality, is founded on the naturalizing of the fetish. And this in turn is dependent upon an economics of display intrinsic both to fetishism and to theatrical representation" (119). Applying Gerber's concept to Dorian's attraction to Sibyl reveals a fetish about the phallus that she otherwise lacks. Even knowing that this portrayal is essentially an act, Dorian is still enthralled and obsessed with her image because it is a fetish which draws him in. Although he is attracted to a woman, he demonstrates a heterosexual performance in which his desires, or fetishes, completely overturn his outward impression. His obsession is then translated onto his homosexual tendencies.

Furthermore, other aspects reveal an obsession with the self, theatrics, and over all aesthetic beauty in which he reveals supposedly homosexual tendencies. In the novel, the narrator says:

He grew more and more enamoured of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were the more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age. He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated hands of the picture, and smile. He mocked the misshapen body and the failing limbs. (Wilde 283-284)

Here, we see Dorian's obsession with his self-image as his painting adopts more signs of distress, obsessing over the features of himself that allow him to not only blend into society, but be praised by it. Ed Cohen's "Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation," situates Wilde's "coming out" as a homosexual and analyzes the means by which sex-gender ideologies form particular literary narratives, such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In his analysis, Cohen discovers that

The Picture of Dorian Gray narrates the development of male identity within a milieu that actively subverts the traditional bourgeois representations of appropriate male behavior. While it portrays a sphere of art and leisure in which male friendships assume primary emotional importance and in which traditional male values (industry, earnestness, morality) are abjured in favor of the aesthetic, it makes no explicit disjunction between these two models of masculinity. (805)

The central characters of the novel represent the relationships Cohen discusses, mainly between Dorian and Basil since Basil is the one that was so drawn to Dorian's beauty that he painted him and then was timid enough to not want to show the painting to others. In the very first chapter, we recall Basil speaking to Lord Henry about his painting: "but I really can't exhibit it. I have put too much of myself into it" (Wilde 141), suggesting that maybe too many of his homosexual tendencies have been put into the painting. In addition, Hall suggests that "Identifying the mutually reinforcing structures of gender and disability oppression involves understanding how other axes of identity, such as race, class, and sexuality, inform gender and disability" (90).

Cohen has this to say about the picture:

Since the portrait stands outside the text and evokes an eroticized tableau transgressing the limits of verbal representation, it establishes a gap whereby unverbalyzed meaning can enter the text. In particular, its visual eroticism suffuses the dynamic between Dorian and Basil, thereby foregrounding the male body as the source of both aesthetic and erotic pleasure. (806)

In a way it subconsciously promotes the visual components of desire within males, which can certainly be examined further in the novel.

IV. CONCLUSION

In terms of contextualization specific to nineteenth-century Gothic literature, we observe many similarities in what aesthetics and characteristics are deemed “normal” to society. It is often that deformities are ill-received differences, and these differences are then excluded from the “able-bodiedness” bubble. These ideals are why representational aspects of novels are crucial for the acknowledgment of misdeeds we perform as humans. Through novels that withstand time, the faults of exclusivity and ideals are exposed so that society can face them like a mirror, emphasizing flaws and prejudices that have harmed society, rather than helped it. Through Lord Henry, Wilde says “As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame” (385). Absorbing stories that reflect the specific wrongdoings of humanity regarding the right of defining who is acceptable and who isn’t, allows readers to easily identify it in their own lives and work towards being more accepting of differences. Shelley’s and Wilde’s novels do just that. In their cruel

and sad representations of characters that do not fit the multifaceted restrictions of society, they exemplify the errors we, as members of society, commit and the traumas we project onto others in a prolonged obsession with an archetype that was initially meant for the gods, noted when Lennard says, “this divine body, then, this ideal body, is not attainable by a human” (25). It is a battle we cannot win.

These two classic novels outlive their counterparts because of their awareness of the unfair, unfathomable standards set forth by society, in the 1800s and today, about how people should look like and what they should be able to do. Shelley’s and Wilde’s refusal to beautify their characters is what makes them beautiful and captivating to their audiences, as they redefine and take agency over words like “monster” and “queer.” McRuer says “Able-bodied identity and heterosexual identity are linked in their mutual impossibility and in their mutual incomprehensibility – they are incomprehensible in that each is an identity that is simultaneously the ground on which all identities supposedly rest and an impressive achievement that is always deferred and this never really guaranteed” (372). Normative achievements of appearance and identity are unattainable because they cannot be fully understood without the complexities stemming outside the set standard of able-bodiedness and heterosexuality. This dismissal of non-normative modes of being in societal reality only promotes self-loathing and self-pity, just as the characters suffered. Both Dorian Gray and Frankenstein’s creature received an unhappy ending, Dorian dies at his own hands while the creature intends to end his own life, results stemming from thoughts of emptiness and rejection, of themselves and from others, seemingly because they fall outside of social norms.

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