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Between Flesh and Fault: A Kristevan Inquiry into the Collapse of Moral and Physical Monstrosity in *Frankenstein*, *The Wasp Factory*, and *Poor Things*

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“It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” (Kristeva 4)

The terms moral and physical monstrosity are often treated as distinct: the former as ethical transgression, the latter as deviation from normative bodies. Yet in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, and Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory*, these categories destabilise. Each text reveals that bodily monstrosity is shaped by ethical violations, while moral monstrosity is inseparable from culturally coded bodies. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, this essay frames the abject as the collapse of boundaries – between life and death, self and other, or male and female – that ordinarily secure the subject. Abjection provides a framework for reading moral and physical monstrosity as twin expressions of the same ontological disturbance rather than discrete labels. This essay first examines how violations of the natural order complicate physical monstrosity before considering how moral monstrosity relies on gendered bodies. Finally, it analyses how unreliable narration and narrative framing deconstruct and shift the site of monstrosity.

In *Frankenstein*, Victor's creature is described as physically repulsive: 'His hair of a lustrous black', and 'his teeth of a pearly whiteness' only serve to contrast even further, 'his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips' (Shelley 45). This dichotomy between the conventionally attractive and the lifeless serves to create such a horrifying appearance that Victor cannot bear to be in the creature's presence: 'Breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room' (45). Before committing any moral wrongdoing, the creature incites terror, suggesting that monstrosity is a physical label. Yet, this bodily monstrosity serves to represent a material trace of moral transgression. The lifelessness of the description, coupled with the aestheticised and fetishist language ('lustrous', 'pearly'), is horrifying, emblematic of Frankenstein's scientific hubris: beauty has been extracted, manipulated and grafted onto death. His creature is assembled from dismembered corpses, embodying not merely physical distortion but the collapse of the natural boundary between life and death. The creature's very

construction literalises what Kristeva identified as the most extreme form of the abject: ‘The corpse... is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life’ (Kristeva 3). In reanimating dead flesh, Victor materialises the abject itself, thus destabilising the ontological boundary that secures the category of human and creates monstrosity.

Where *Frankenstein* externalises monstrosity onto the creature, *Poor Things* relocates it onto the creator. Like Frankenstein’s monster, Godwin provokes physical repulsion: ‘From one side of him, an army officer hurriedly departed from the other, a nursemaid with a baby that had started to scream’ (Gray 48). The comic effect of both the toughest (a soldier) and the least prejudiced (a baby) of society being unable to tolerate his presence accentuates that Godwin is not simply ugly, he is monstrous. Godwin is also described to have an ‘ogreish body’ and to stand ‘like a nightmare’, highlighting that his bodily form is so far outside the normative realms of humanity that it has to be compared to the fantastical (12; 44). Yet, as in *Frankenstein*, bodily distortion is not merely superficial but reflects ethical transgression. Godwin’s grotesque bodily form is the outward sign of a deeper moral rupture. His experiment – ‘the soul of an innocent, trusting, dependent child inside the opulent body of a radiantly lovely woman’ – is the violation of the boundaries of nature: the separation of mother from child, subject from object, infancy from adulthood, and the female body from paternal control (36). But the true site of monstrosity in the novel is not Godwin but Bella. Kristeva argues that abjection first emerges, ‘with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her’ (Kristeva 13). Bella’s existence literalises this. She is simultaneously the child and the maternal body that should contain her, collapsing the distinction on which the subject relies to constitute itself. In this way, she is neither object nor subject but an unstable amalgam that exposes the fragility of the symbolic order that differentiates these categories. Thus, while Godwin’s body is grotesque, Bella’s existence is abject: she embodies the monstrosity of boundary collapse, which destabilises identity.

In *The Wasp Factory*, Frank perceives his castration as monstrous, interpreting it as a cause for social exclusion: “‘Oh, he’s not all there, you know,’ but that’s just their little joke (and sometimes, just to rub it in, they don’t point to their head as they say it)’ (Banks 13). Although Frank insists ‘it’s no skin off my nose,’ the defensive tone reveals internalised exclusion (13). His sense of bodily lack becomes the fountainhead for an identity built on violence and control – a compensation for a disfigurement he believes has rendered him less than fully male. This internalised monstrosity is evident in Frank’s murder of his cousin Blyth. While placing a snake in Blyth’s artificial limb, Frank fixates on the mutilated leg, calling it a ‘monstrous erection’ (40). The phallic imagery casts Blyth as Frank’s bodily double: by transforming his mutilated leg into a phallic object, Frank projects his anxieties about his own body onto his cousin. In weaponising Blyth’s prosthetic limb, ‘the instrument of his downfall’, Frank symbolically externalises and destroys what he perceives to be his own monstrous condition (41). What he experiences as physical monstrosity (his imagined castration) thus drives his morally monstrous violence. While Bella and Frankenstein’s monster are abject to the external world, Frank’s castration is internally abject as a disruption to the ‘clean and proper’ body (Kristeva 9). In this way, monstrosity is neither strictly moral nor physical, as the interplay between the two is both the cause and site of Frank’s perceived monstrosity.

The codification of bodies as gendered also disrupts the boundaries between physical and moral monstrosity. In *Frankenstein*, Victor refuses to make a female monster, fearing that ‘a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth’ (Shelley 127). Although he frames this as a moral responsibility towards the future of humanity, the narrative reveals a deeper anxiety surrounding female reproductive autonomy. The imagined female creature is rendered more threatening than her male counterpart as her reproductive capacity places her beyond Victor’s control. In this way, female autonomy itself is constructed as a form of

monstrosity. His possessive attitudes towards Elizabeth — ‘till death she was to be mine only’ — emphasises his ideal woman as passive and controllable (29). In contrast, the imagined female creature ‘might refuse to comply with a pact made before her creation,’ a prospect Victor finds intolerable, not because it is evil, but because it would introduce a woman who, socialised outside the patriarchal order, cannot be predicted, controlled, or mastered (127). It is fitting, then, that Victor chooses the Orkney Islands as the place of her construction. The Island’s ‘barren’, ‘continually beaten upon’ land, and its inhabitants ‘benumbed by want,’ create a landscape drained of vitality (125). As a symbolic womb of the half-formed female creature, Orkney represents infertility and deprivation; an environment in which female generative power is constrained, neutralised or denied. In choosing an infertile landscape to create a potentially fertile monster, he attempts to symbolically control the reproductive autonomy that he imagines as monstrous. Thus, monstrosity is not purely moral, as Judith Halberstam argues, ‘fashioning a woman demands that [Victor] construct and enervate a subject that is, in its future function at least, all body’ (Halberstam 47). This emphasises that what is morally monstrous cannot be separated from gendered bodies on which morality is differentiated.

If Frankenstein’s female monster represents the threat that an autonomous woman would pose to the patriarchal order, in *Poor Things*, Bella actualises this threat. The naivety of her character indicates a paradox in the Victorian ideals of womanhood. Bella is pure and innocent – ‘What men have hopelessly yearned for throughout the ages’ – yet free of the patriarchal expectations that women are socialised to uphold (Gray 36). Eloping with Duncan Wedderburn, she writes, ‘We wed wed wed, went wedding all the way to London town... And yet poor Duncan wanted marriage too!’ (105). The word choice of ‘wed’ as a sexual innuendo parodies the social institution of marriage. The Victorian morality of marriage as a social contract is inverted, destabilising its mechanisms of patriarchal control over women’s

bodies. Moreover, reverting gender roles, Wedderburn narrates he was Bella's 'hopeless plaything... so dependent and dilapidated, I kept begging her to marry me' (87). The expected hierarchy of adult male authority is subverted, as Duncan is reduced to a feminised, almost childlike dependency that destabilises Victorian assumptions about both gender and age hierarchies. His description of her as 'the White Daemon who destroys the honour and manhood of the noblest and most virile men in every age,' encapsulates the gendered logic of monstrosity: the oxymoron of 'White' (purity and innocence) and 'Daemon' (seduction, danger) constructs female sexual autonomy as inherently corruptive (94). Bella becomes, in his eyes, the 'gorgeous monster', a figure whose physical femininity is inseparable from her moral monstrosity (91). While Bella's monstrosity in the eyes of male characters is described as moral, the ethical transgression is reliant on her physical female body. Thus, monstrosity is neither purely physical nor moral but rather the two in interplay. This creates the effect of abjection, as Kristeva argues, 'the attempt to establish a male, phallic power is vigorously threatened by... the feminine, [which] becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed' (Kristeva 72). Bella's autonomous femininity thus becomes abject, exposing patriarchal fears of boundary disruption that fuel her construction as monstrous.

Where the men in *Poor Things* experience Bella's autonomy as an externalised, abject threat to patriarchal order, in *The Wasp Factory*, femininity becomes an internalised threat – one that destabilises Frank's very sense of self and must, as Kristeva argues, 'be suppressed' (72). Frank's perceived castration drives him towards extremes of masculinity to overcompensate and reclaim his masculinity. This often materialises in misogyny and a desire to control and violate nature: 'My greatest enemies are Women and the Sea... destroying what I have built, washing away what I have left, wiping clean the marks I have made' (Banks 43). Nature, often associated with femininity and harmony, becomes Frank's personified enemy with the capitalisation of 'Sea'. The sea, in this way, symbolises the threat

femininity poses to Frank's identity; its resistance to control and its capacity to erase boundaries – 'destroying' what he builds, 'wiping clean' his marks – mirror the instability he associates with the feminine. His hatred becomes a symbolic displacement of the femininity he fears both in the external world and, crucially, within himself as he later finds out he is biologically female. To Frank, the natural world and women are an inseparable threat to his masculinity; his unethical behaviour towards nature can be explained through this lens. When a buck he is hunting retaliates, he decides to take revenge on the rest of the rabbits by inserting a bomb in the dead buck's anus and placing it in the rabbit burrow: 'the buck-or what it meant, its spirit maybe-soiled and degraded, taught a hard lesson, and I felt good' (36). The buck, overpowering Frank and thus threatening his perceived masculine identity, must be 'degraded' and punished. Frank's violence towards the rabbits is part of the same psychological pattern as his misogyny; both are compensatory acts aimed at reasserting control. As Bethold Schoene-Harwood argues, 'Frank identifies nature with femaleness and fluidity, both of which threaten to upset and decentre the carefully established order of his insular world' (Schoene-Harwood 110). This highlights that Frank's moral monstrosity arises from the female body's ontological disturbance – both in his idea of femininity as destructive and in his suppressed biological femininity. Womanhood becomes abject as it threatens to overthrow the fragile boundaries of his own constructed order, an order where he is masculine, in control, and stable.

Finally, this essay will explore Halberstam's concept of monsters as 'fugitives of identity' (Halberstam 37). She argues the monster's ability to 'deconstruct at any time, to always be in the process of decomposition,' destabilises monstrosity as a fixed identity (37). This is clear in all three texts' narrative structure, as focalisation forges new perspectives of who and what is truly monstrous. The creature's narrative focalisation in *Frankenstein*, displaces monstrosity: 'I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew and could distinguish

nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept' (Shelley 80). The creature's perspective subverts his label of monstrosity, placing it onto Frankenstein. Victor takes on the role of the neglectful parent as the creature's infantile condition leaves him 'helpless' and in pain. In light of the creature's focalisation, Victor's refusal to make a female creature becomes morally monstrous: 'Shall each man... find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone?' (128). Frankenstein's monster is excluded from the natural order, he is neither 'beast' nor human. Victor created him and now refuses to reduce the burden of his loneliness by creating the one being that could accept him. The creature's perspective illustrates that focalisation itself enacts the decomposition of monstrosity. By the end of the novel, it is no longer clear where monstrosity really lies – in Victor, in the creature, or indeed in wider society's rejection of him. This suggests that monstrosity is neither strictly a moral nor a physical label but a focalised perspective reliant on narrative construction.

Poor Things deconstructs monstrosity to an even greater extent. A letter from Victoria (Bella) McCandless frames the main narrative as an 'infernal parody' of her life (Gray 273). Deconstructing Godwin's monstrosity she writes, 'all women... ALL WOMEN AT FIRST SIGHT felt safe and at peace with him' (259). The repetition emphasises the extent to which Godwin's monstrosity has been fabricated; he is not a predatory mad scientist nor is he physically repellent. Victoria also challenges her femme fatale status, 'I am a plain and sensible woman, not the naive Lucrezia Borgia and La Belle Dame Sans Merci described in the text' (251). The references to well-known figures associated with female danger and moral corruption allow Bella to reject her narratively constructed label of a 'gorgeous monster' (91). Her focalisation emphasises that monstrosity is not simply moral or physical in literature but ultimately fabricated and rooted in framed perspectives. While Bella and the creature deconstruct their monstrosity through focalisation, an added layer of narrative framing reinscribes them as monster once again. The fictional archivist 'Alasdair Gray' ends

Poor Things on an ambiguous note: ‘Reckoning from the birth of her brain... she was exactly sixty six... Reckoning from the birth of her body in a Manchester slum in 1854, she was ninety-two’ (317). This mock authority over Victoria’s letter satirises the patriarchal production of knowledge; although her narrative is far more plausible than Archie’s, his story remains the official account of her life. Similarly, in *Frankenstein*, after hearing the creature’s testimony, Walton briefly sympathises then revokes his empathy. He exclaims, ‘Wretch! ... you throw a torch into a pile of buildings; and when they are consumed, you sit among the ruins and lament the fall’ (Shelley 168). Walton’s framing restores the creature to a monstrous category even after he has humanised himself. This extends Halberstam’s idea of monsters as ‘fugitives of identity’ (37). While monstrosity can be deconstructed, narrative framing reasserts the monstrous label. Monstrosity is therefore neither physical nor moral but a fabricated narrative tool. Moreover, the very act of self-articulation threatens ontological boundaries: the dead reanimated speaks for himself, and a woman undermines patriarchal order by reclaiming her story. Their narrative reveals the fragility of the social and epistemic boundaries their worlds rely on. Consequently, the framing imposed by Walton and ‘Alasdair Gray’ operates as a containment mechanism. Bella and the creature become abject not because of inherent monstrosity, but because their self-articulation threatens the boundaries their societies depend upon.

Similarly, Frank’s unreliable narration emphasises that monstrosity is unstable and continually decomposing. Unlike Bella or the creature, whose identities are reframed through competing narrative layers, *The Wasp Factory* is mediated entirely through Frank’s perspective. The revelation of his biologically female body destabilises not only his masculine identity, but the entire symbolic system through which he has interpreted his violence. Frank refers to his former self as ‘murdered’ and asks ‘Why? How could I have done these things?’ signalling a radical disjunction between the self which acted and the self

that narrates (Banks 182). His retrospective realisation, ‘If I could never become a man, I – the unmanned – would out-man those around me,’ exposes his earlier moral monstrosity as dependent on a fabricated bodily narrative (183). His rituals, misogyny, and murders were not innate, but expressions of the violent masculinity engineered for him by Angus. As the architect of Frank’s false body and false identity, monstrosity is displaced from Frank to Angus – a Frankensteinian creator whose violation of bodily and parental boundaries aligns him with Kristeva’s abject. He becomes a figure who ‘cannot be assimilated’ into an ethical or symbolic order (Kristeva 1). Thus, even in a text without competing narrators, monstrosity remains a shifting construct, decomposing as soon as the bodily and narrative foundations that support it collapse.

Ultimately, moral and physical forms of monstrosity converge in the abject: a collapse of boundaries that produces ontological instability at the core of identity and meaning. What initially appears as physical monstrosity – the creature’s reanimation of deceased parts, Godwin’s grotesque figure, and Frank’s perceived castration – becomes inseparable from moral forms of monstrosity produced by the violation of nature, control, and violence. Likewise, actions that appear morally monstrous depend on bodily norms: Victor’s control over female autonomy, Bella’s refusal to occupy Victorian femininity, and Frank’s violent compensation for a physically lacking body. Across all three texts, monstrosity is reconfigured by narrative voice; unreliable and framed narrators complicate the very location of monstrosity, revealing it to be a shifting construct capable of deconstruction rather than stable. Halberstam argues that *Frankenstein*’s structure ‘is itself a hybrid form, a stitched body of distorted textuality’ (Halberstam 33). While this describes the narrative strategies within each text, it also captures the intertextual dynamics uniting them. Together, the novels form a stitched body of monstrosity, reworking the tropes of the mad-scientist creator, morally transgressive creation, and boundary-collapsing abjection. Each demonstrates that

monstrosity is not generated solely in the body or by moral transgressions, but through a boundary-breaking interplay between them.

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