An Exploration of Voice

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AN EXPLORATION OF VOICE

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A Final Portfolio

Submitted to the English Department of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the field of English

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Dr. Ethan Jordan, First Reader
Ms. Kimberly Spallinger, Second Reader
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Kristy Montgomery

Spring 2021

Analytical Narrative

My arrival into the Master’s Program at Bowling Green State University was greeted with a choice: which of the three pathways should I follow within in the English department? My undergraduate degree is in English Education, a certification that started my career as a teacher in a traditional classroom for several years. Education has always been a passion of mine; even as a small child, I wanted to be a teacher. My time as an educator, however, was full of realizations of the realities and challenges faced every day. Between time constraints and limited funding, teachers also had to navigate the balance between the standards set out for them and the real-world opportunities (and traumas) that faced their students daily. I, meanwhile, was provided opportunities to connect my love for teaching with my passion for the theatre: I was offered and accepted a new position outside of traditional education. This story ultimately led to the decision that had to be made upon my application at BGSU: would I pursue the English Education track or the English Individualized?

Ultimately, it was again passion that drove my selection. Rooted deep within my love of teaching and my love for theatre is a common ground: I am deeply intrigued by stories and by giving voices to those who are often ignored or mistreated. As an English teacher, my job revolved around helping my students find their voices. As a theatre professional, I work daily to share the words and work of artists through the vessel of actors onstage. Beginning as a student in the Individualized MA program within the English department, my goal was to use the open opportunities to build an experience that would let me highlight these passions. At the suggestion
of my graduate advisor, I also decided to undertake obtaining a certificate in College Writing: Theory and Practice. Due to this choice, many of my class selections still fell into the education category, but I also had the opportunity to take interesting classes within the 6800 class options and some unique course opportunities like a poetry course.

My time at BGSU has drawn me to several particular academic topics of research, all housed within that familiar umbrella of elevating ignored voices. As a feminist, my primary topic of research has been some aspect of the way that the roles of women have been defined by a patriarchal tradition of using female figures to provide lessons on the way women are expected to behave. As an educator, I also found myself examining the ways that our society’s foundations have hindered other voices beyond just those of women in order to keep people ‘in their place.’ Carrying out research with these connections to one another has been an extremely enlightening process. Each piece in my portfolio reflects an element of this overarching theme of researching the ways that our foundations and experiences shape us, either by our own hands or by the hands of others.

The first piece in my portfolio is “In Defense of Eve,” which serves as a representation of my most substantive research undertaken while in my program at BGSU. This paper was written for the Graduate Writing course I took in my first semester. Through substantial research across a variety of sources, this piece examines the way that first women in various cultures are used by patriarchal societies to dictate the expected gender roles and expectations of all women who follow. Most of my research revolves around the biblical Eve and the way that her ‘First Sin’ has been used over time to create a ‘blueprint’ for all women. Male-dominated cultures have used Eve (and figures like her) to keep women where they wish them to be, a tactic that has ultimately
impacted the way we live in modern times as well as throughout history. This piece was first written in the summer of 2020 before being revised several semesters later in 2021. The revision process involved making edits throughout, with the most major edits being the process of reorganizing the evidence so that it blended more cohesively throughout rather than existing as separate, similarly-referenced sections. I was, and remain, deeply motivated by the research involved in this piece and anticipate it being an area of further research for me in my extended education and academic career.

The second piece in my portfolio is “We Shall Be Monsters: Using Psychoanalysis to Examine the Impacts of Early-Childhood Trauma through a Comparison of Mary Shelley to Frankenstein’s Monster.” This piece was first written as part of a critical theory class in the Fall of 2020. Through various theoretical lenses, the life and experiences of Mary Shelley are connected to the characters of Dr. Frankenstein and his Creature. My most major revisions involved removing some extraneous sections that were important to the original assignment but not as directly connected to the topics selected for the bulk of the research. This piece remains directly in line with the feminist approach in my first essay by examining, in part, the way that Shelley’s role as a woman impacted her experiences throughout her life. Her work represents someone who spoke up and used her voice, despite the expectations of the time, and it is even more impactful as a novel because she elected to use it to express topics of trauma and alienation. By letting this piece follow “In Defense of Eve,” the Shelley essay shows a feminist take on the power of storytelling and the way it can be used by an ostracized figure.

My third piece is “The Echoes of Absence: Examining the Modern Impact of the Lack of Female Representation in Recorded History of Technical Communication,” originally written for
a technical writing class in Fall 2020. My research for this piece involved an exploration of the way that the lack of proper female representation and acknowledgment in the field of technical communication was directly related to a patriarchy-based lack of opportunities provided to women throughout history. From gender-segregated education to gender-biased expectations and roles, this essay analyzes the impact that silencing voices in the past can have on modern opportunities and voices. This piece was one about which I was the most uneasy, as I felt it had some branching elements to it that didn’t completely tie together. My revisions involved minor edits and reorganizing as well as contextualizing several of my sources in order to make them more impactful. This piece also connects to my substantive essay by highlighting the way that gender roles have continued to be used by a male-dominated society to keep women doing roles deemed appropriate for them.

My final piece is “Breaking Down Birdcages: Addressing the Negative Impacts of Standard English and Dominant Language Ideology and an Exploration of Possible Solutions,” which was also originally written in a grammar class in the Fall 2020 and revised in the spring of 2021. This piece takes a pedagogical approach to the impacts that standard guidelines and expectations can have on silencing modern voices. In this case, the research is synthesized to discuss the problematic way that Standard English and dominant language ideology reinforce racist ideas of what is ‘professional’ and ‘appropriate’ speech. Through a mix of data-driven evidence and anecdotes, this piece examines the negative impact that can come from trying to enforce the concept of ‘proper English.’ My revisions were minor edits in this case, with this being the one in my portfolio that required the least work. Like the third piece in my portfolio,
this essay looks at how a culture dominated by one ‘correct’ society can try to force outliers into submission.

All four of my works represent different elements of my overarching area of major interest. Through the writing of all four, I had the opportunity to engage in a variety of research on the ways that our voices can be shaped, discarded, and silenced by the world around us. In some cases, I had opportunities to research ways of solving these impacts. As I progress through the end of my program and into the future, I intend to continue the research into this idea. I’ll use the results of my research to help guide my work at the theatre and in the creation of new educational opportunities for students I encounter along the way.
In Defense of Eve

Abstract

We live in a society that is drenched in often unacknowledged patriarchy and bias. Despite progressions in equality, men still have more advantages than women. The following research examines literature that highlights a likely reason for this gender inequality: a continued faith-based inferiority brought on by the actions of the biblical Eve in the Garden of Eden as told through highly biased male voices. As the first woman and first sinner, Eve’s actions serve as a blueprint for all women, and men have long used that idea to establish a set of rules and expectations. What lingering punishments do we still feel on Eve’s behalf? How do we see these ancient repercussions in modern society? What do we do to fix this misogynistic problem? The results of this research aim to highlight the answers to these questions.

Literature Review

Pamela Norris’ Eve: A Biography describes the biblical Eve as the blueprint for every woman who follows her. Norris carefully constructs her argument by describing the base story of Eden before reflecting on the ways in which male storytellers throughout history have retold its contents to manifest their own objectives. She points out the areas of interest in the story,
focusing on the actions of God within the story and those that follow it. She says, “the Garden of Eden is generally thought to be an etiological myth, a story that justifies how things are” (Norris 16). She essentially claims that the story of Eden doesn’t actually fit in well with the rest of the Bible, positing that the sole purpose of its existence is to explain why humans have sex and why women are to be seen as inferior to men. She carries this concept throughout her book, telling a variety of stories from the Bible that further depict a world where the wants and desires of women are secondary to those of men or the male God. She explains that this religious basis serves as the reason for the way life is currently, providing a foundation for dangerous patriarchy.

Jessica Decker writes that goddess figures are given a monstrous connection. She pits them against men by claiming that they are seen as almost inhuman. She also describes this monstrous nature as the anger beneath the surface, saying that there is “an unconscious wish for the repressed [woman]’s return” and subsequent destruction (Decker 751). Essentially, Decker uses figures like Hera and Pandora to explain how women are just barely containing the fact that they are boiling and that feminism provides an opportunity to begin letting out the fury that has been so long restrained. William Phipps compares and contrasts the myths of Eve and Pandora in order to draw conclusions between them. He asserts that while the original versions of each story are not the same, the later treatment of Eve is influenced by the way the Greek myths treated Pandora.

“Eve Was Framed” mounts an argument against Eve’s mistreatment as provided by variations of the Eden story told through a biased perspective, specifically citing children’s bibles as a resource often used to spread a certain way of viewing the Great Fall. The author provides
several ways to view the story in a new light, ways that would help to break away the patriarchal bias.

*The Hammer of Witches* is an immensely biased and hate-filled text from 1487. Written by a pair of men, this book is written to serve as a guidebook to explain why women are more likely to be swayed into witchcraft and sorcery. The perceived weaknesses of women are listed in great detail. They are described as deceptive, carnal, and lacking in faith. They go so far as to claim that without women on earth, men would be permitted to interact regularly with the gods. “If women did not in fact exist,” Mackay and Institoris claim, “the world would remain unburdened of countless dangers” (168). The age of this text helps to provide an extra bullet point on the timeline of injustice brought to women through the voices of men.

Patricia McNamara’s research on *Feminist Ethnography* approaches the concept of female storytelling from a different perspective, focusing on the importance of giving women voices through her work as a social worker. She emphasizes the comfort women often feel sharing with other women while pointing out how that comfort disappears outside of the circle of sisterhood. Her work as a social worker provides a unique angle on this subject, looking specifically at how the shifting of female stories through a male voice can impact situations of domestic violence and other familial struggles. McNamara’s research is fascinating, if very specific and limited to the social work field. However, her findings can be applied to the conversation at large, particularly if looking at how the dominance of male voices impacts rape culture.

In “Woman as Other,” the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir analyzes the way that men reinforce the idea that woman is an Other to the normalcy that is the male
gender. Men benefit from the otherness because it continues to reinforce the perceived inferiority of women. De Beauvoir further claims that “no one is more arrogant towards women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility” (de Beauvoir). This statement, and the rest of the article, discusses the ways that men profit from this alterity and how it has negatively impacted the conversation at large. After all, why would men want to fix something that benefits them so heavily?

Kate Millett examines the concept of patriarchy and how it has been influenced by the same religious background as the impacts of the fall of Eve on the expectations of women. Millett’s analysis translates the reach of these biblical concepts beyond moral expectations to more secular and legal ones, saying:

In most forms of patriarchy this has generally led to the granting of religious support in statements such as the Catholic precept that "the father is head of the family," or Judaism's delegation of quasi-priestly authority to the male parent. Secular governments today also confirm this, as in census practices of designating the male as head of household, taxation, passports etc. Female heads of household tend to be regarded as undesirable; the phenomenon is a trait of poverty or misfortune (Millett).

Her article and the research within it demonstrates the pervasiveness of the impact of how using women as props for pushing certain agendas has directly impacted our culture as we know it. She makes the claim that “patriarchy has God on its side,” something proven time and time again through her article and many of the others used for research in my writing (Millett).

Akca and Gunes further discuss the way that women’s lack of independent voice impacts them negatively. Due to “patriarchal constructions of gender appropriate behavior,” women are
left without the ability to have a mind of their own (10). There are limits in place that prohibit a woman from fully telling her own story. Even now, in a world where the internet exists and provides a platform for sharing stories, the negative connotation many men associate with feminism keeps those words from being heard. The authors discuss additional examples of female figures who’ve been treated poorly by misogynist literature, such as Chaucer’s Wife of Bath. In doing so, they set up a tradition of using women in literature as props in order to send a message.

Maggie Collins comes at the subject of sexism in a much more modern way, specifically looking at the misogyny that is present in internet memes. These very recent inventions create a pattern of expectations that the audience soon forgets exist, making it a good avenue for subtly convincing them to believe a certain way. At the very least, the existence of these sexist graphics have the impact of becoming commonplace and expected, making them less likely to elicit an outward negative response. People continue to overlook the dangers in the messaging, and so these memes are allowed to continue negatively influencing their audience.

**Introduction**

The stories we tell often have deep roots, spreading from those roots into twisting and evolving branches throughout time. Growing. Adapting. Developing a life of their own. Our history is founded on a rich tapestry of oral tradition and exchange of ideas. Although passing down these lovingly rendered tales is important to culture, it may also prove dangerous. The risk is a simple one: a storyteller naturally infuses their own bias into their words. These opinions shift and morph, creating something new out of the bones of the original. Sometimes, a
storyteller has a particular goal to accomplish with their retelling. Sometimes, a storyteller has an intent to do harm or reinforce a particular message they want to send to an impressionable audience.

This scenario happens all too often in history books, where the stories are told from the perspective of the conquerer. Voices are molded and shifted in classrooms, erasing individual cultures to replace them with what is considered more appropriate. Our history is full of these etiological myths (myths intended to explain why things are the way they are), and they've shaped the foundations of our day to day lives in ways we don't even always realize. The greatest example of this comes in the form of the Biblical Eve. By using (and abusing) these female figures in various ways in storytelling and through lessons, patriarchies throughout history and across various cultures have created false narratives of “learning opportunities” in order to establish guidelines and expectations for women.

A Blueprint for All Women

A statue standing outside of the Cathedral of Saint-Lazare in France depicts Eve reaching for the forbidden fruit. Pamela Norris describes the remainder of this statue by pointing out that the figure of Adam on the other side has not survived, “the depredation of time ironically emphasizing what had come to be seen as Eve’s sole responsibility for the catastrophic fall” (Norris 40). This anecdote is used to illustrate the fact that, despite the fact that Eve was created as a companion and that the Hebrew Bible depicts Adam as jointly present during the eating from the Tree of Knowledge, more widely available translations have not treated Eve kindly. She is instead described as a villain, the sole first sinner, and the reason for woman’s
submissive role in society. Eve and her treachery became a blueprint for all women, told through predominantly male voices as time passed until the gender roles became a fixed expectation.

Moving further along in history, we continue to see a volume of misogynist literature that continued to fortify the idea that men were superior to women and we see faith used to reinforce the concept of the ideal woman. Akca and Gunes describe this ideal as a “virtuous wife who make the family home a moral sanctuary,” reflecting the growing Puritan middle class that existed in the eighteenth century and influenced the patriarchal culture that grew out of it (Akca and Gunes 9). Because of the cultural implications of a faith-dictated difference in the genders, female voices continued to be stifled. Women are relegated to props in stories, used to prove a point but given little of their own.

Eve serves as a weak-willed archetype of Woman, but she isn’t the only one of these present in the Bible. We also see this in the figure of the virgin mother Mary, who is often contrasted with the fallen mother Eve. This comparison between “madonna or angel is no more real that the image of woman as whore or witch, yet once again the Biblical origin of the stereotype validates it and imbues it with the aura of being perceived truth” (Akca and Gunes 4). Because the Bible says it, it must be so.

Witches and Weakness

Looking briefly and specifically at the concept of witchcraft as mentioned above, there are many unfortunate pieces of evidence of the dangers of this blind faith in these kinds of misogynistic comparisons. The trials in Salem are only a small fraction of this particular history; women around the world have been connected to the concept of sorcery. Despite the differences
in stories that arise out of this phenomenon, there is often a common connection: the root of why women are believed to be more susceptible to witchcraft is found in interpretations of the story of Eve. In 1487’s *The Hammer of Witches*, male authors Mackay and Institoris hatefully describe the weakness of women that make them so easily seduced by sorcery. Blaming Eve, they claim these weaknesses to be a “tendency of [woman’s] temperament towards flux,” declaring that this instability makes women easily misled by evil (Mackay and Institoris 164). Women also have “loose tongues and can hardly conceal from female companions the things that they know through evil art” (Mackay and Institoris 164). The pair further connect the descendants of Eve back to her through their presumed lack of faith, claiming that women are weak to the temptation of witchcraft because Eve was weak to the temptation of the serpent in Eden (Mackay and Institoris 165.) Because of Eve’s sin, the authors claim that women in general are “defective in the powers of both soul and body, [so] it is not surprising that they cause more acts of sorcery” (Mackay and Institoris 164). Mackay and Institoris also discuss the impacts of other figures, like Helen of Troy (whose actions killed many thousands). They discuss the evils and deaths endured by the Jewish people at the hands of Jezebel, described as "a very bad queen.” They mention the actions of Cleopatra as well, whom they describe as “a very bad woman.” Declaring that there are many others, they assert that “the world now suffers on account of the evil of women” (Mackay and Institoris 168). It’s evident in their way of writing that they intend to turn their reader against the entire female sex by trying to establish a pattern of evils.

While it is inherently easy to discredit these men in their writing (for their obvious misogyny, if nothing else), there is a darkness to the existence of this book that helps prove the true danger in allowing men to use Eve and her descendants as props for explaining female
behavior. Part 1 of *The Hammer of Witches* continues to vehemently describe why women are weak to sorcery, and the remainder of the book describes how to judge a witch and how to punish a witch. Considering what we know of the witch trials around the world and the atrocities committed by those who believed similarly to these two men, this danger of men in power using these kinds of arguments should be apparent.

Mackey and Institoris were, of course, not the first or last to describe women as weak-willed. Pamela Norris describes several instances beyond Eve, focusing in Part 1 for a bit on the unnamed wife and daughters of Noah. Citing early European dramas, she talks about a theory that the so-called Mrs. Noah was, in fact, “tempted by the devil to hinder Noah’s salvation” (Norris 45). In essence, there’s a belief that she was also weak to the devil’s temptation (Norris 45). What we see, using these examples, is the recurring implication that women are simply unable to resist their evil nature.

**Property**

Several centuries later, Simone de Beauvoir provides a counter to the kind of vehement sexism presented in *The Hammer of Witches*. De Beauvoir discusses the idea of woman as an Other, pointing out that a “man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex” — in essence, man does not have to declare his gender because his gender is the norm. Woman, meanwhile, is something entirely different. She continues to discuss the fact that many men in power and men of influence (like Mackay and Institoris would’ve been in 1487) have long been driven to prove the inferiority of women based on the belief that it was ordained by God. Because men have “taken up arms against women” like Eve and Pandora and have used
philosophy and theology to support themselves, they’ve created an expected pattern of behavior to be carried out by this Other Sex (de Beauvoir). Any behavior outside of the expected pattern is unacceptable.

Kate Millett’s work carries this battle against women further by highlighting the effects of a patriarchy founded on religion. She does this in several ways, first highlighting the ways that men gaslight women through chivalry. On the surface, holding the door for women and behaving chivalrously appears respectful, but Millett claims that the concept elevates a woman to a pedestal level. She stresses that “the raptures of the poets had no effect upon the legal or economic standing of women;” basically, chivalry is a distraction for the fact that the laws and expectations are not on the side of women. Women are expected to submit to their husband, but at least the husband holds the door for them (a concession of his power over them).

Millett points out that one effect of patriarchy is setting one woman against each other, citing the ongoing counterbalance between women who work and those who stay at home. This idea connects back to our Biblical examples as well, as the Deceptive Eve is often compared as a foil to the Virgin Mary. Millett also discusses the idea of women as property to men. She calls Eve’s sentence political in nature, an explanation of woman’s inferior status. By comparing Eve to Pandora, Millett connects the two through a “proprietary father figure [who] is punishing his subjects” (Millett). Both figures are victims of an angry male god-figure and subject to humiliation and subordination to men thereafter. Millett further talks about this idea of property in terms of rape, citing the fact that rape has traditionally been viewed as a crime one man commits upon another. The woman — the victim — is irrelevant, except as property to her father or husband (Millett). Similarly, Pamela Norris connects current rape culture to Eve, saying that
“Eve/Woman stands accused of vanity, moral weakness, and sexual frailty, while Adam/Man’s role in the transaction can be summarized by the familiar defense: ‘She led him on’” (Norris 5). In our current culture, we so frequently hear that exact defense used in cases of male actions against women. We also constantly hear the importance placed on virginity, a construct that appears frequently in the Bible and factors heavily into a woman’s worth. William Phipps comments on this with a definition, stating that “virgins had virtue because, as the roots of these words indicate, they had male (Latin, vir) restraint” (Phipps 45). Even in speaking of a woman’s purity, one cannot fully do so without acknowledging men in the very description.

Norris discusses these same concepts of women as property of men, drawing comparisons to the way that women are “protected” in the Bible. She says of Abraham’s wife, Sarah: “Throughout Sarah’s history, her sexual vulnerability is counterbalanced by God’s intervention on her behalf” (Norris 49). She goes on to explain that “when she finally does conceive, she is long past the menopause, and once again it is God who makes her fertile, just as God intervenes to protect her from ravishment by the stranger kings. Whilst Sarah’s human authenticity cannot be discounted and is what makes her so sympathetic a character, God’s wishes are ultimately what matter” (Norris 49). The fact that this story appears in the same Bible that contains the fall of Eve and her subsequent punishment seems no coincidence—these stories all continue to teach lessons to women on how they should act and why.

Like the biblical Eve, Greek mythology also pits its ‘first woman’ as the root of evil. Pandora is presented to her husband as a beautiful gift, in her hands a box containing mysteries and strict instructions to never open it. Curiosity gets the better of her, and she opens the box, releasing horrors into the world because of her actions. Like the story of Eve and Eden, the myth
of Pandora is assumed to alert men to the idea that women are evil and worthy of wariness. Also like Eve, Pandora is created second, as an afterthought. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these two myths have been largely woven together, but this is not a true comparison. First, William Phipps notes that there is no actual evidence of common oral tradition between the Greeks and Hebrews, so the stories likely are not influenced by one another. Additionally, he points out that the Greeks only have a story of the creation of woman, and not of man (Phipps 37). Therefore, it is likely that Pandora is not actually meant to be a myth about creation, but rather more an anti-feminist fable brought into existence by a man who hated women.

This man, Hesiod, shifted the idea of Pandora as a Mother Earth figure to make her into a death bringer. While the Bible certainly treats Eve as a sinner and temptress, her actions are treated as a cautionary tale to other women. By contrast, Pandora’s actions are treated as inevitable, a warning to men not to trust women. Phipps believes that the treatment of Pandora was taken from Greek mythology and applied to the Hebrew Bible after the fact, using the similarities between the two to assert that Eve was designed in the aftermath to be more like Hesiod’s version of Pandora. No longer are Adam and Eve jointly responsible for the fall from Eden, but instead Adam was dragged down to his death by Eve. Suddenly, Eve is a death bringer who will remain unforgiven.

Eve isn’t the only religiously-linked female figure who cannot be forgiven for her actions. Norris discusses the fact that though his wife and daughters are mentioned at significant points in the story of Noah’s Ark, they are intriguingly absent as God briefs Noah and his sons on the expectations for repopulation. Their participation in this is expected and taken for granted, but never requested. Norris points out, too, that though God’s post-Eden curse has been
lifted in the aftermath of the flood, Eve and womankind’s destiny to remain subservient to her husband hasn’t been revoked (Norris 34-35).

We see a mistrust of mothers in Greek mythology as well, specifically in the figure of Hera. Described so often as petty and jealous, this Queen of Gods gets a bad reputation despite the circumstances surrounding them. In one myth, the angry Hera wishes to get back at Zeus for the birth of Athena, who is not her child. She strikes the ground with her hand, and Gaia fulfills her wish by allowing her to conceive the birth of the monstrous Typhon. This myth provides a contrast to the virgin Mary’s conception by God; instead of being orchestrated by male figures, Hera’s impregnation doesn’t involve a man at all. The fact that Hera is described as irrational and violent, given circumstances like these, helps to paint a picture of her mistreatment due to her gender (Decker 751). While Zeus’ actions are so often forgiven, Hera’s are not. As mother of monsters, her children (like Typhon) are also unforgiven, much like Eve and her female descendants in Christianity.

**Modern Implications**

The treatment of figures like Eve and Pandora has heavily influenced the concept of modern gender roles and expectations. From the Biblical explanations of appropriate female behavior onward, we see what is expected of a ‘good wife’ versus the behavior of a bad one. Patricia McNamara, a social worker, presents research on the impacts of women not having a voice of their own, specifically describing the way that male partners and their domination in the household can be incredibly detrimental in unique and perhaps unexpected ways. She cites examples where interviews with parents of children undergoing psychiatric examinations and
care tended to end negatively due to the father dominating responses in research interviews. The mothers in her examples contrasted their partners by being more careful and measured in their responses, and she notes that they are occasionally even hesitant to counter the male voice. Despite this hesitation, McNamara finds that most of the mothers in her examples are far more informed in their answers. When given an opportunity to speak their own thoughts, they were far more helpful (McNamara 171-172).

Norris discusses this lack of female voice as well. She posits the importance of Eve’s actions first, claiming that “human history could not have begun” had she not eaten from the forbidden fruit. Instead of being the first sin, this bite “kickstarted humanity out of the stasis of Eden into the harsh realities of the human condition” (Norris 36-37). Earlier in her book, she proposes that it isn’t Eve who introduced the original concept of sin after all, but rather Cain’s murder of his brother (32). There is some weight to this argument when one measures a woman’s temptation against a man’s violence, and it highlights the promotion of patriarchy that is present even in the early texts.

Modern texts highlight patriarchy and sexism in new ways. In her 2015 article, Maggie Collins sets out to position Internet memes as a way of discussing the sexism that is prevalent online. Using several examples, she lays out an argument that describes these memes as an easy way for viewers to inadvertently train themselves to think the same way. She does this by discussing the concept of an enthymeme. Enthymemes, she explains, “cause audiences to form opinions about written jokes for themselves. They force the audience to determine the unstated assumption and therefore understand the joke” (Collins 96). Most memes are posted mostly anonymously and then shared around the internet. It becomes the responsibility of the audience
member to react on their own, without the herd. They have to make an assumption about the original author’s intent and then decide how they would like to respond to that assumption.

She continues to make her argument by pointing out that many memes, specifically those that come in the format of animal advice memes, present danger because the audience begins to expect a certain intent. She uses the example of the Overly Obsessed Girlfriend meme, which depicts a wild-eyed woman and text overlaying it that highlights perceived behaviors of female obsession. Every time someone sees a meme in that format, Collins asserts that they are inclined to believe that the behavior is “bad” behavior. This assertion is similar to what we see with the earlier examples of faith-guided sexism.

The Fix

Simone de Beauvoir argues that the ‘woman question’ seems insignificant because of masculine arrogance. Men have made it a fight, which is why the word feminism has such a negative connotation to so many. De Beauvoir argues that the way to solve this is to “discard the vague notions of superiority, inferiority, equality which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh” (de Beauvoir). While a great notion, this idea of starting new is likely impossible. We live in a world that’s been based heavily on these origin stories that have been used to explain why women ought to behave a certain way— stories enforced and retold by men. There are so many parts of our history that we only know about because they were told through a male lens, making it very difficult to see how exactly a woman in the time might’ve lived or reacted to her own treatment. Relying on a biased and power-motivated storyteller for information that dictates expectation is a dangerous game.
As cited by Akca and Gunes, Virginia Woolf’s answer to this problem is allowing women the room to create space of their own in writing and in life in general. She explains her point using the fictional sister of William Shakespeare, who is just as gifted as her brother but could’ve never attained his great heights of achievement. Because of the duties expected of her, she’d have never had the time or opportunity to find a “room of her own” to establish herself as a writer. Even if she had, the expectations of women of her time, she’d have become too stressed by the world. Despite her creativity and drive, her woman’s body and what it represents would’ve kept her from success (qtd. in Akca and Gunes 11). Contextualizing this example, the authors carry the concept of a room of one’s own further. Through feminist literary discussion and criticism, a woman may furnish a room of her own until it becomes a home of her own. This home will eventually house a “real Woman […] who, at last, has a mind of her own” (Akca and Gunes 14).

Perhaps the simplest answer comes in re-framing Eve’s story. Because of the history of misusing Eve as justification for patriarchal standard, telling her story with a different mindset may ultimately help to impact future generations. Elisabeth Gillhouse suggests highlighting the fact that the serpent did not, in fact, tempt Eve with riches or beauty or flattery; instead, she was tempted by the promise of knowledge (Gillhouse 265). Because the patriarchal interpretation of Eve creates an image of a seductress smiling coyly as she enacts humanity’s fall from grace, framing Eve’s decision as motivated by growth in knowledge and intelligence can help dismantle the detrimental gender roles moving forward.

Conclusion
First Woman. First Sinner. Death-Bringer. Blueprint. Everywoman. All of these descriptions are used to describe Eve, but the fact remains that she is mostly a cautionary tale. Her mistreatment throughout history, the unfair way in which her actions have been twisted and contorted and used against womankind in general, paint an excellent picture of the ways that bias in storytelling can impact a culture at large. Even without religion directly in play, the inferiority of women that began with interpretations of Eden impact more than just our home life — every aspect of a woman’s life is *still* guided by the idea that they are different enough from men to deserve less autonomy. Given the deep roots, this problem is a challenging one to overcome. The rise of feminism and the taking back of Eve and her actions is one way to help solve it. Eve deserved better, and modern storytellers must be careful not to repeat her injustice when telling other stories.
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We Shall Be Monsters: Using Psychoanalysis to Examine the Impacts of Early-Childhood Trauma through a Comparison of Mary Shelley to *Frankenstein*'s Monster.

**Abstract**

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was born in 1797 and raised primarily by her father after the death of her mother. Shelley’s motherless and rather unique upbringing had a hand in her creation of her classic novel, *Frankenstein*. This novel tells the ill-fated story of Dr. Victor Frankenstein, a young scientist who attempts to subvert natural creation by building his own life form. As the Creature is brought to life, the story twists for the worst as the Creature and Dr. Frankenstein are each unable to escape the true monsters within their nature and ultimately are destroyed by them.

This paper explores the impacts of trauma and unconventional childhood on the psyche, connecting Shelley with those she elected to write about through an examination of the real experiences of the writer and the fictional experiences of her characters. Shelley’s narrative choices are connected to her own endless series of tragedies and the trauma caused by them. When readers explore *Frankenstein* through a psychoanalytical lens that connects Freudian theory with Lacan’s mirror stage, it becomes clear that Shelley’s disjointed childhood, the lack of a mother figure, and her role as woman writing during the early 1800s led to an imbalance in her
view of herself. This fractured imagery may have led to further tumult as she aged, resulting in her romantic relationship with a married man and struggles with parenthood. These experiences were passed along to her fictional creation, exhibited in the Creature’s unnatural birth and lack of a mother-figure, his fractured view of himself and longing for a partner, and his destruction of Dr. Frankenstein’s marriage — a distorted mirror of Shelley’s own experiences.

This paper also analyzes the impact of the Creature's environment on his behavior using the theory of object relations. The Creature is given artificial life in a laboratory, and then cast aside when deemed a failure, all experiences that help evolve him into the monster he always was. Dr. Frankenstein is equally examined using these lenses, his own descent into monstrosity connected to his relationship with his creation and the hubris involved in its birth. Shelley again is connected back to her works of fiction through the concept of outcasting — all three are examined using Agamben’s Homo Sacer, wherein an individual is deemed unworthy by a sovereign entity and ostracized. The overarching theoretical framework uses several psychoanalytic lenses to connect the author’s personal experiences to her subjects.

Introduction

Creator and creation are permanently intertwined. The latter cannot exist without the former, and the former cannot be fully realized without the latter. Mary Shelley conceived the idea of *Frankenstein* through a dream, conceptualizing the concept and “birthing” it into existence as a young woman. As creator, she poured her own experiences and beliefs into the work, dramatizing them as the first true science fiction novel while still allowing them to become a true reflection of her own experiences in many ways. In the case of the novel itself, the process
of creation links the doctor to his Creature in a way that cannot be broken. They cannot destroy each other and cannot survive without each other. By exploring the connections between the real experiences of the author and her creation, one can begin to see how much of an influence the creator truly has on her creation. A true sense of the connection between the life of Mary Shelley and her work can be gained by analyzing *Frankenstein* through the lenses of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Giorgio Agamben, object relations, trauma theory, imperialism, and new historicism.

**Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley**

In order to most effectively connect author to text, it is critical to begin with a summary of both. Mary Shelley was born to unusual parents: her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was a prolific feminist writer of both fiction and nonfiction on the topics of education, morality, and politics. Shelley’s father, William Godwin, was also a writer, as well as a minister-turned-atheist and political anarchist. They married in 1796 and gave birth to Mary in 1797. Ten days after her birth, Wollstonecraft died. In the aftermath, Mary idolized the memory of her lost mother while craving attention from her emotionally disconnected, workaholic father. Her upbringing was full of intellectual discussions and anarchist teachings, and Mary soon learned Latin, Greek, French, and Italian. The sum of her knowledge was unusual for the time period, though certainly something that would have pleased her feminist mother.

In 1814, Mary Godwin met Percy Bysshe Shelley, a married poet with similar religious and political views as her father. Two years later, his first wife drowned herself and Mary Godwin became his second wife. Life did not immediately improve for the new couple, and
tragedy followed their union. The year 1819 marked the deaths of two of her children (a third had died in 1815), the birth of her only surviving child, the start of a nervous breakdown, and the publishing of *Frankenstein*. By 1822, Mary Shelley had lost her half-sister Fanny and another child, and she had suffered through the drowning death of her husband. As a widowed mother with a young son, she was largely alone and in possession of very little money. She continued to write and published several more books as she raised her child, and much of her writing focused on the goal of preserving her late husband’s legacy. She died in London at age 53.

*Frankenstein: A Summary*

*Frankenstein* is told through separate sections with different narrators. The first narrator, Robert Walton, encounters a weak man named Victor Frankenstein while on a voyage to the North Pole. As he helps the stranger return to health, he listens as Frankenstein describes his childhood and academic history. Frankenstein explains his obsession with the secret of life, an obsession that led to years of research before he felt he had solved it. Armed with his belief, the young scientist begins building a monstrosity out of human body parts. He finally tests his theory about the secret of life by successfully animating his Creature using electric current. As soon as the being is brought to life, Frankenstein immediately regrets his actions and shuns the Creature. This rejection sets the wheels of tragedy into motion.

Frankenstein describes his brother’s death at the hands of the Creature, as well as the execution of the young girl falsely accused and convicted of the murder. The Creature blames his actions on a combination of loneliness and revenge for being neglected by his creator. The Creature begs for a female companion, and Frankenstein reluctantly agrees at first but is morally
unable to finish the task of creating a second monster. Betrayed, the Creature angrily exacts revenge through two additional murders. First, he kills Frankenstein’s friend, a crime for which Frankenstein is initially accused. The Creature then kills Frankenstein’s new bride on their wedding night, an act that directly causes heartbreak that kills Frankenstein’s father as well. Furious and resolved to end the chaos, Frankenstein chases his Creature northward, where he is found by Robert Walton. At this point, the stories converge, and Walton explains that Frankenstein ultimately dies from his weakness and illness. After his death, the body is visited by the Creature, much to Walton’s surprise, who weeps over his creator before disappearing to die himself.

**Distorted Mirrors: Trauma and Freud**

Trauma runs rampant through both Mary Shelley’s life and her creation, and it is therefore the best place to begin. By exploring trauma both as its own entity and through a Freudian lens, one can get a sense of the distinct way in which Shelley’s trauma over the loss of her mother had direct ramifications on her life and her narrative choices when writing *Frankenstein*. Her own experiences with trauma, loss, obsession, and fear are reflected in the characters of Dr. Frankenstein and his Creature, combining to provide a platform upon which the tragic events of the story unfold.

According to Freud, everything is a reflection of something “familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud 604). This uncanniness lends itself to a connection between creator and her writing as a form of untangling repressed feelings. Like Shelley, Dr. Frankenstein’s description
of his childhood includes an intelligent father and a deceased mother. His mourning of the latter takes the form of “guilt-ridden withdrawal” of his close connection to his mother, something that he instead applies to his love of Elizabeth out of a need for the feminine figure (Sherwin 885). Frankenstein’s shift of his love from his mother to his future wife follows the Freudian expectation, the transition allowing him an opportunity to repress his grief by finding a new object for the sexual love that would have been otherwise bereft of an object in the absence of his mother figure. By comparison, Mary Shelley’s loss of her mother occurred shortly after her birth. Given that the Freudian mother figure serves as a barrier between the female child and her sexual desire for the father, the loss of Shelley’s mother so young had the impact of drawing her closer to her father. Her disconnected sense of self and lack of barrier for her sexual desire continued to be reflected in her romantic life, resulting in her entanglement with a married man. Through this comparison, Shelley’s choices in this particular element of Dr. Frankenstein’s characterization do not demonstrate a reflection of her experiences but rather a reflection of what could have been had she not lost her mother too soon.

Despite the more natural transition of his sexual desire, the death of Dr. Frankenstein’s mother has its fair share of negative impacts as well. The death of his mother “becomes the focus of the regressive descent into phantasmagoria that constitutes Frankenstein’s reanimation project,” prompting Frankenstein’s “grotesque act of lovemaking” that results in his creation of life without the aid of a mother (Sherwin 885). After losing his own, he determines that the role of mothers in general must not be a necessity. In doing so, he damns his creation to a similar disconnect faced by Shelley herself — the Creature will lack a mother to desire and will instead spend its existence obsessed with its father: “No father had watched my infant days, no mother
had blessed me with smiles and caresses” (Shelley Ch. 13). The Creature begs for a female companion, a place for his desire:

> What I ask of you is reasonable and moderate; I demand a Creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself: the gratification is small, but it is all that I can receive, and it shall content me. It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another. Our lives will not be happy, but they will be harmless, and free from the misery I now feel. Oh! my creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request! (Shelley Ch. 17)

One could easily imagine this plea coming from Shelley herself, after years of being largely ignored by the object of her obsession (her father) in favor of his new wife and his studies. Given the trauma that would follow the author’s introduction and love affair with the then-married Percy Shelley, perhaps she came to see herself as a monster as well in the face of her tragedy.

In the process of creating the monster, Dr. Frankenstein is almost feverishly enthusiastic, the promise of scientific discovery guiding him. The laboratory becomes an “artificial womb,” and Dr. Frankenstein usurps “woman as the maker of children” in order to play God (Spivak 1156). By stealing woman’s “physiological prerogative,” Frankenstein ostensibly withholds birth from the mother and completes a Freudian male fantasy (Spivak 1157). Despite his subversion of nature, he is thrilled by the possibility of his science: “A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs” (Shelley Ch. 4). Immediately after his Creature is “born,” his enthusiasm turns to fear and disgust: “[…] now that
I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (Shelley Ch. 5). Perhaps this selection of writing serves as a reflection of Mary Shelley’s anxiety over childbirth, an anxiety that would prove well-placed with the deaths of her first three children before they had an opportunity to emerge from infancy (Homans 111). By reflecting her trauma through her characters, Shelley explores what would surely be dark fears. By subverting nature to “birth” his creation, Frankenstein’s actions provide a possible alternative to traditional childbirth, a source of uncertainty for women within a time period where bringing children into the world could often result in death. However, this alternative proves deadly: his creation is a monster, and the Creature’s actions ultimately destroy both himself and his creator. Perhaps this outcome is a way of narratively expressing that there is no way to escape the gender expectation of childbirth, even when fully aware of potential dangers.

Frankenstein’s self-pity throughout the novel is a reflection of his manner of dealing with his trauma. Despite acknowledging his role in the Creature’s path of destruction, “he still insists on placing the ultimate blame on the ‘inherent’ evilness of the Creature whom he created” (Harris 4). Frankenstein also serves as an unreliable narrator, an example of collective memory wherein his version of traumatic events is told in a way to emphasize the uncontrollable evil of the Creature to deflect blame from himself (Hinrichsen 639).

By examining the Shelley and her novel through the lenses of trauma and Freud, it becomes clear that the author used her novel to explore some of her own experiences in new and inventive ways. It is likely that through her writing, she found some catharsis in describing some of these traumatic events.
Fractured Images: Lacan

Lacan’s mirror stage begins once a child is able to look into a mirror and identify their own reflection. This identification serves as “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (Lacan 619). The identification is the child’s discovery that they have a presence in the world, but this image is fractured. The efforts to fix these fractures are what lead to neuroses. Within this theory, humans are fundamentally impacted by and dependent upon interactions with the social world. These interactions are what give the individual their personality and characteristics. Unlike Freudian theory, neuroses and personality traits are not defined by sexual repression but instead by the unconscious errors made in the individual’s path to the formation of the \textit{I}. Lacan’s conscious self is borne out of identifying an image and the finding of a presence in the social world as time passes.

Frankenstein’s Creature is a physical representation of the unfixed fractured image. The newborn Creature is immediately rejected by his parent and the world around him, but he still strives to correct the fractures in his image. Having only known hate, his personality and characteristics take on violence — the social world around him has never shown him love, so he is less inclined to reflect it back at them. The formation of the Creature’s \textit{I} is marred by the disgust of others, despite his attempts to grow, learn, and gain love. After continuous rejection, he embraces his monstrous nature and rejects humankind right back: “There was none among the myriads of men who existed who would pity or assist me; and should I feel kindness towards my enemies? No: from that moment I declared everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against him who had formed me, and sent me forth to this insupportable misery” (Shelley Ch. 16). Painstakingly constructed from a collection of body parts (physically representing his own
disjointed picture of himself), the Creature is often identified by his eyes, his monstrosity unavoidable when gazing into them: “the terror Frankenstein feels from the reciprocal gaze of the Creature represents his horror at becoming a subject” (Salotto 194). The Creature’s eyes help to serve as a reflection of his fractured image of himself: though intelligent and curious, they are unnatural and wrong. He wants to be better and to be part of society, but he cannot escape the monster that he is.

The Creature again serves as a representation of Mary Shelley’s own fractured image of herself. Her birth became a break from the natural order with the death of her mother soon after, leaving her with only a paternal figure in her life. In seeking a solution to her fractures, she was instead met with a father too busy with his studies and a stepmother with whom she did not get along. Seeking connection led her to longing for a married man and playing a part in the destruction of his marriage. (This act is mirrored in *Frankenstein* when the Creature kills the doctor’s wife on their wedding night.) Instead of finding happiness through this connection, the fractures in the formation of Shelley’s *I* continued with difficult pregnancies and the death of her first three children. By mirroring the tragedies in her life with the characterization of the monster, Shelley essentially turns herself into a monster as well, refusing to “suture the split in the *I*” so that the “subject [in this case, both Shelley and her Creature] remains fractured” (Salotto 191).

**Relation and Rejection: Object Relations and Homo Sacer**

The psychoanalytical theory of object relations says that the individual exists as the self in relation to the social world. We are driven by our interactions with the world around us, and the conscious self is prioritized over the unconscious self. Our behavior and place in the world
are both based on our experiences through our upbringing and into adulthood (Rivkin and Ryan 520). If environment shapes what we become, Frankenstein’s Creature stood very little chance of a positive experience in life. He began his existence by awaking in a laboratory, his first breath a bastardization of nature. His father rejected him immediately after bringing him to life, fleeing soon afterwards. His first encounter with humankind, therefore, was in the form of hate from his creator. This hate was followed by fear and destruction as the Creature continued to discover only “abuse from inflexible people around him” (Harris 5). Despite being a “newborn” in the world, he is not incapable of viewing and understanding the interpersonal relationships that humans were meant to have. Though he can see love and beauty, he can never have it for himself — he would never be able to “attain the appearance of love like Elizabeth and Frankenstein shared, and never [be] able to attain the purity and beauty of Justine” (Harris 5). His environment fails him.

Agamben’s theory of Homo Sacer involves an individual being cast out of society; the Creature embodies this role, despite his desires for the opposite (Agamben 793). He has no place of his own in society and no sense of individuality within his community. In the aftermath of being accused of murdering William, the Creature declares that “all men hate the wretched; how then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things” (Shelley Ch. 10). However, the Creature then cleverly defends himself: “Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy Creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us” (Shelley Ch. 10). The wretched Creature, who has been hated by the person who created him, has done nothing but live up to the expectations of his capabilities as an inferior, broken being.
Therefore, he cannot be held accountable for his actions. If he *is* held accountable, then Frankenstein must also be considered responsible due to his role as creator.

Despite being cast out, the Creature tries to be compassionate and empathetic. He desperately wants to be welcomed into society, no longer a Creature rejected from the larger humankind. Near the end of his life, he again tries to find a family of his own. After becoming attached to a family he comes upon in the mountains, he finally builds courage to introduce himself. Instead of acceptance, he is shunned. He declares that he will have vengeance and never again try to be one with humans (Harris 6). Ultimately, the combination of an environment that has done nothing but reject him since his creation and the trauma involved with wanting nothing more than to belong set him off on one final quest for revenge against his creator. Essentially, he determines that the universe intends to make him a monster, so he will embrace his role.

Due to his subversion of nature and defiance of God, Dr. Frankenstein also becomes an outcasted figure. The Creature’s impact on his life and the deaths of so many of his loved ones continue to drive him to escape to isolated locations, ultimately leading him to his death in the remote north. Because Dr. Frankenstein can be considered both the Homo Sacer and the authority figure who initially casts the Creature out, his characterization ultimately becomes a uniquely disjointed thing, befitting his paradoxical interaction with his creation.

Mary Shelley also neatly fits into the role of outcast. She was a feminist in a time when gender roles were vastly more prevalent and protected than they are now. She began a relationship with a married man, swiftly becoming his second wife after the suicide of his first. In the span of only a few years, she birthed and buried three of her children. After the death of her husband, she was cast out further by his wealthy family and forced to live on her own with
her child with very little to her name. Perhaps she, again, identified with the Creature; both experienced a seemingly endless series of misfortunes.

**New Historicism**

The theoretical lens of New Historicism involves the connection of a text to the historical context within which it was written (Montrose 809). Given Mary Shelley’s highly political early education, and particularly the anarchist leaning to it, it is perhaps less surprising than it might otherwise be that one of the most influential historical events on her mindset and writing was likely the French Revolution of 1789. Shelley had not yet been born, much less begun to conceive her novel, but the ramifications of the Revolution on the British people would continue to be felt and analyzed by the high intellect and political mind of her father, the anarchist with a dislike of monarchy and governmental establishment. The Reign of Terror that followed the French Revolution resulted in a disillusionment amongst some of those who had supported the revolt in the first place while encouraging neighboring governments to try to assert dominance and control to keep their citizens from following in the footsteps of the French. In addition to these nearby foreign troubles, political discussions and movements concerning British opinions on the abolishment of slavery and civilian unrest in relation to new industrialization and food-related concerns would have provided Mary Shelley with ample historical context to use when crafting *Frankenstein*.

In practice, Shelley echoed the cruelty and tyrannical nature of political establishments through the mouth of the monster, who makes critical comments on the society around him. He says, “For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow, or
even why there were laws and governments; but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my
wonder ceased, and I turned away with disgust and loathing” (Shelley Ch. 13). At first, the
Creature indicates that he did not understand the concept of murder, and then found himself
disgusted by it. As he learned more about human society and the fact that humans murder each
other often enough that laws had to be created to punish them for this act, he was unable to
consider himself inhuman or unnatural for killing. If humans did it all the time, then his actions
surely made him more human. This quote mirrors the sentiment connecting violence, anarchy,
and government control that followed the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror to follow,
the Creature’s disillusionment matching the feeling borne by citizens who had originally
supported the chaos before confronting the bloodshed that followed.

The Creature also serves as a representation for mob violence, a reflection of British
concerns in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Shelley’s anarchist politics and dislike of
government aside, her role in society would likely have still made her quite nervous about the
prospect of similar violence breaking out in her country in an attempt to overthrow the
monarchy. If examined with this historical context in mind, the Creature can represent the very
worst that could occur if a dangerous force were to be set loose upon society. Late in the novel,
Dr. Frankenstein observes the Creature fearfully, narrating:

I trembled and my heart failed within me, when, on looking up, I saw by the light of the
moon the daemon at the casement. A ghastly grin wrinkled his lips as he gazed on me,
where I sat fulfilling the task which he had allotted to me. Yes, he had followed me in
my travels; he had loitered in forests, hid himself in caves, or taken refuge in wide and
desert heaths; and he now came to mark my progress and claim the fulfillment of my
promise. As I looked on him, his countenance expressed the utmost extent of malice and
treachery. (Shelley Ch. 20)

The task/promise being discussed is the idea of creating a female partner for the Creature,
something that the doctor ultimately refuses to do. After creating a being so capable of
destruction and chaos, the idea of allowing that dangerous force to grow is too much for him to
handle. He breaks his promise. In reading this passage, one can replace the imagery with the
fears of seeing violent revolutionaries “by the light of the moon” and fearing it spreading.

Shelley was also influenced by the scientific debates of her time, which were influenced
heavily by many other disciplines with less distinction than had been given in the past.
Essentially, science was not as clearly cut as it may have otherwise been, instead potentially
involving topics in the arts or politics, philosophy or religion. It is likely that these less rigid
delineations between subject areas influenced Shelley’s overlapping scientific concepts in her
novel. Dr. Frankenstein’s creation of life is a bastardization of both the scientific process of birth
as well as the Biblical account of creation, but it borrows evidence from both. This crossover
reflects the blurred barriers of Shelley’s time, likely echoing discussions within her own home
between her father and the many scholars with whom he kept company. Shelley utilizes
knowledge of the sciences of her day as well, these ideas likely picked up by those same scholars
in her childhood home. For example, though she is vague in describing Frankenstein’s process in
bringing the monster to life, it is most often depicted as done through the use of lightning or
electricity. This principle mirrors the efforts of a man named Luigi Galvani, who focused on the
use of electric current to stimulate muscles.
In total, these and other historical events help provide intriguing context to Mary Shelley’s thought processes in creating her characters and writing her novel. By exploring the events and beliefs of the time period and utilizing them through the lens of New Historicism, one can begin to see how the world around the author can make a tremendous impact on the work that is produced.

Examining *Frankenstein* in a modern context, we also see intriguing concepts emerge. Shelley’s novel serves as a narrative tool for “examining the morality and ethics of the experiment and experimenter” (Shafer, “Why *Frankenstein* Matters”). Regardless of the time period, science serves as an explorer, shaping new frontiers of discovery. Mary Shelley was impacted by the sciences of her time, and her work continues to have relevant connections to modern sciences as well. In 2020, science has evolved to ensure more reviews and safeguards in an effort to keep a living Victor Frankenstein from emerging and engaging in rogue experiments. Negatives aside, Frankenstein’s scientific feats resonate with modern studies in “genetic engineering, tissue engineering, transplantation, transfusion, artificial intelligence, robotics, bioelectronics, virtual reality, cryonics, synthetic biology, and neural networks” (Shafer). It is an impressive feat for a work of fiction written by a young feminist in 1818 to have connections and implications to sciences that exist over two hundred years later.

**Conclusion**

By itself, the text and characters of *Frankenstein* tell a tragic story of what can occur when nature is subverted, and chaos is allowed to ensue. A theoretical framework that connects the psychoanalytical lenses with imperialist and new historicist context allows the reader to
understand the way that both the author and her creation are impacted by their internal and external experiences and environments. The lenses of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, object relations, and trauma studies provide a fascinating insight not only into the construction of the characters but also allow for a comparison between the real experiences of author and her reflections of herself in her work. Evidence provided through an exploration of New Historicism allows for connections between real events and the impacts of empiricism as well. The combined result of these theories is an analysis of the text that shows how deeply connected Shelley was to reflecting herself in her characters and story.

The story of a human creation that wreaks overwhelming destruction is a recurring event in history. Some, like the creation of the atomic bomb, result in tangible devastation. Others, like the invention of the internet, have created uncertainty and discord while “destroying” the world as we knew it before and rebuilding it in a new image. Humankind is obsessed with pushing itself to new limits, a reflection of Dr. Frankenstein’s ego-guided goal of creating life in spite of God or nature. In our modern age, it is difficult not to see oneself echoed in Shelley’s characterization of the doctor in some capacity. However, is modern humankind more a reflection of Dr. Frankenstein’s ambition to create beyond limitation… or are we instead a reflection of his Creature, shaped by the world around us and left to make our own way within it?
Works Cited


Between programs of mentorship and the use of historical precedent, most modern workplaces engage in a rich practice of relying on experience to bolster confidence and support for decisions about organizational growth and future direction. This practice is so effective that it often happens without conscious thought – after all, why wouldn’t a company examine their past successes or failures to guide their future actions? The obviousness of these business tactics highlights another important question: what happens when there is no recorded history to rely back on? This question is the reality for women working in technical communication and STEM fields. In this essay, I will be discussing research on the ways that the lack of female representation in the history of technical communication has created gender-based challenges for modern women in the workplace and ways that women can gain greater recognition in the future.

A History of Absence

The lack of recorded history of female contribution to the fields of technology and technical communication does not mean that no contribution took place. The root of this history of absence boils down to two major factors: the technological work of women was not treated
same as that of men, and women were not afforded the same educational opportunities. In this section, I will explore the concept of “woman’s work,” and I will examine the gender inequality in historical educational opportunities.

“Woman’s Work”

Where the origins of technical writing are concerned, the truth of the matter is that women are some of the earliest communicators of technology. This truth exists due to gender roles within the household and the desire to share their ways of accomplishing their expected tasks with other women. Patriarchal categorization led to a distinction between these household technologies and the “male machines” of business and war that followed, leading to women and their contributions not being acknowledged for their efforts (Wajcman 287). Instead, women’s inventions were relegated to the category of woman’s work, with most of them improving domestic and household duties that were believed the be the responsibility of women. These inventions were left out of technical communication’s history for a remarkably simple fact: they were simply not regarded as technical and often not even as work (Duffus 72).

One explanation for these inventions not being considered technical is cultural: in most parts of the world, women are expected to helm the responsibilities of child and home care. As these roles are their jobs, creating ways of making those jobs easier and more efficient simply do not qualify as technology and invention in the same way that a man’s contribution might. Women were “hampered by their own productive (and reproductive) responsibilities” and should not attempt to contribute outside of the household (Durack 26).
Despite this belief that woman’s work was not technical enough to be considered true invention or progress, the work of women serves as the foundation for many future advancements. John Flynn addresses cooking as a form of woman’s work, establishing that varying processes of cooking represent some of the earliest forms of alchemy and scientific invention. Even though this process is “central to the empirical foundations of technology and science,” cooking is left out of histories of technology, replaced instead by “catapults, diesel engines, telephone systems, nuclear power” and other “male machines” deemed more worthy of inclusion (J. Flynn 325).

Despite their lack of inclusion in historical texts, women still wrote. Women in the English Renaissance primarily wrote “translations of works by church fathers, maternal advice books, and books of devotions and prayers in which the woman writer was seen in search of her own spiritual perfection and that of her female readers” (Tebeaux and Lay 35). However, the audiences to these writings were often “hostile or suspicious, viewing the very act of writing as inappropriate for a woman” (Tebeaux and Lay 53). This reaction helps to demonstrate the fact that knowledge or practice of technology and invention was simply not part of the expected behavior of women in history.

The Impacts of Gender-Segregated Education

Silencing the voices of female inventors (such as the now familiar names of Hedy Lamarr and Ada Lovelace) and technical communicators was only part of the process of leaving women out of the evolution of the field. Historical educational opportunities for women reflected “the Biblical assessment of women’s worth” and was designed to prepare women for their domestic roles (Tebeaux and Lay 59). Women were only permitted to use the technologies that reasserted
and reinforced traditional gender roles and did not challenge “the view that men are by nature more expert at using mechanical equipment” (Thompson and Smith 192). These vast differences in the way that women were educated created a gender-segregation that helped further the absence of female presence in recorded technical history.

To further explain the impacts of gender-segregated education on the opportunities for female inventors and communicators, it is important to break down the process. Gender-segregated education kept women from learning the skills needed to build models and apply for patents. If they managed to figure out the process on their own, without the assistance of education, women often could not afford the patents by themselves, having less disposable income and less time than their male counterparts. If they could afford these patents, married women could not own their own inventions until the ability to do so was enacted into law in the United States in the mid 1800s (Durack 38).

Beyond this logistical gatekeeping, women also faced cultural obstacles. Women were (and still are) discouraged from owning their achievements. Historically, this cultural expectation went further, encouraging women to be generous and allow other masculine voices to speak up and take credit for their work (Durack 38). We see this latter point reflected in examples like the sewing machine, where women (as the primary users) are permitted to operate the technology because of their “innate expertise in sewing” as afforded by their gender. Meanwhile, men were (and often still are) treated as the technical authority over the machine because of their role as inventor and the belief that their gender has more innate expertise in technology (Thompson and Smith 190).
A lack of proper and equal education forced female inventors to find their own processes for creation—it is in this way that we have innovations like sewing patterns and many other domestic inventions, even if the name of the inventor was not originally tied to her work. Despite this perseverance, female inventors still had their efforts ignored, degraded, or stolen from them. The combination of these circumstances led to an unstable historical foundation for generations of female inventors and communicators who would follow in the future.

The Modern Workplace

After a history of being ignored and segregated, it is unsurprising that women continue to face challenges in the fields of technical communication and STEM workplaces. The precedent of being treated as less qualified is a tricky one to supplant. In this section, I will examine specific examples of the obstacles faced by women in the modern workplace and trace those experiences back to their historical precedents.

Stagnant Discussions

If a tree falls in the woods and no one hears it, did it fall at all? This cliché applies to the discussion of gender disparity in the workplace: several research studies have shown that “interest in feminism and women in technical communication has declined over the last 15 years” and that this reveals a “stagnation” in the discussion of equality (Sullivan and Moore 336). If gender inequality is the metaphorical tree that has fallen in the woods, but no one is making a fuss over it, how do we know that it is a problem at all? The message in the published discourse of the field of technical communication continues to be that “issues of gender and feminism in the
workplace or in our business and technical writing classrooms are a minor concern” and that “stereotypes, sexism, and discrimination are issues of the past” (White 29, 33).

Many of these studies approach their research from a perspective that is too broad. Scholars in technical and professional communication do not often specifically or thoroughly research the female practitioners within such environments. Instead of speaking directly to women who face the obstacles in the workplace, much of the research asks men about the experiences women, leading to biased results (Peterson 22). In an environment that has historically invalidated the word of women, it makes unfortunate sense that they would not be consulted in this case either.

**Continued Educational Struggles and Revisiting “Woman’s Work”**

Despite what studies may say about gender disparity being a non-issue in the workplace, the obstacles faced educationally and occupationally speak to a different truth. Women disproportionately do not graduate from fields like engineering, and those that do find difficulty getting jobs working in their field of study. Despite efforts to promote STEM courses, studies show that fewer young women are participating in them (Sullivan and Moore 334). Culturally, women are often not encouraged to complete their degrees because “many in the profession and the public believe they should not do so because such work would take them away from their homes, their husbands, and their children” (Skinner 309).

Those graduates who do enter engineering or other technological fields mostly end up working in human resources or as clerical support — just as we saw historically, we see circumstances where women are relegated to more gender-appropriate roles despite having the training
to complete actual technical communication and engineering. The male-dominated culture of the field inherently assumes that the male engineers will work equipment while the female engineers act as notetakers — not to be confused with technical writers or communicators (Sullivan and Moore 334). Even those with extended studies and expertise are automatically regarded as less qualified, their achievements downplayed, and their studies discredited (Shuster 383). Just like their historic predecessors, twentieth century women who entered the traditionally male fields of science and technology were “invited to learn by their fathers and husbands and were allowed to work with their husbands and male professors, but in many cases were assigned ‘woman’s work,’ such as the research assistant who recorded the details of the experiment rather than participated in its creation” (Tebeaux and Lay 71). The ultimate result of this is a gender of workers feeling underutilized and unappreciated.

The historical lack of proper education for women in these fields continues in a new and modern way. The textbooks and leading journals in business and technical writing studies have not changed much in the past 25 years, despite the global shifts we have seen in other areas of our culture regarding gender equality (White 29). However, it is in this study of textbooks and technical writing and what they lack that we see a glaring conclusion: business and technical writing speak of the workplace as a genderless, neutral subject. In male-dominated fields, the neutral subject will inherently be male (Shuster 383). If they continue to be the Other to a neutrality that is masculine, women must adapt around it.
Gender-Based Obstacles in the Workplace

Unfortunately, the obstacles do not end once a woman has gotten a job in her desired field. Women in the field are being subjected to a new kind of absence. This new absence is ripe with gaslighting, where the day-to-day experiences of women in the field exist while the studies about the workplace claim that the issues are minor. Data has shown some improvement in the gender disparity in recruitment, retention and advancement in companies exhibiting best practices, these findings are the exception rather than the rule; the gender inequality in the workplace still exists (Grosser and Moon 194). So, what can this inequality look like?

Women face major obstacles in how to present themselves in the workplace. If they demand control, they will be labeled as bossy; if they do not, they will begin to feel inconsequential (Sullivan and Moore 335). Women also face the struggle of finding their voice in conversations with their male colleagues. Because the field of technical communication so inherently relies on an ability to clearly express oneself in writing, it is critically important that a woman in the field find ways of expressing herself that combine professionalism, expertise, and confidence. In writing technical communication or in speaking with others in the field, a woman must be infinitely more careful with the words chosen to “combat notions that they are passive or acquiescent” (Sullivan and Moore 341).

The domestic expectation of the female gender role provides another form of occupational gatekeeping, particularly when it comes to work-life balance. In an anecdote on this subject, a female technical writer explained that she truly realized the extent of her marginalization when she left her professional editing position because she had become a mother. According to this in-
dividual, her workplace offered “no flexible hours, no opportunity to work from home, and no daycare options,” leading her “to feel that a career in technical and professional communication was not open to [her] because of [her] gender and biology” (Peterson 21). These qualities are so hardwired into the jobs themselves that it allows employers to (unknowingly) fall into the same patriarchal trap that has always existed to try to keep women where they “belong” (Peterson 21).

Fixing the Past and Looking Forward

Leveling the playing field of discourse will allow everyone to be involved in technical conversations and communications and will begin to rebuild the history of technical communication so that it includes female contribution. In this section, I will begin by highlighting some female contributors to the history of technical communication. I will then explore several approaches that can be taken to equalize the gender disparity in the workplace.

Pulling Voices from the Shadows

One way to help bolster the female place in the evolution of technical communication is to highlight significant contributors to the field. Technical writers Elizabeth Tebeaux, Susan Jarrett, Miriam Brody, and Andrea Lunsford are credited with demonstrating “the importance of historical investigations of women’s contribution to the field,” the “legitimation of a feminist approach to technical communication, and an exploration of the ways in which focusing on women’s contributions changes the field in important ways” (E. Flynn 314). Following their example, I intend to highlight several other women of note.
The importance of confidence cannot be overstated. One historical example of a woman whose work had influence due to its direct and non-apologetic voice was that of Elizabeth Clinton. Clinton used the Bible to claim authority about breastfeeding versus the use of surrogate nurses. Though her stance that breastfeeding must only be done by the mother and that no substitutions should be allowed was a product of its time and of her faith, the confidence of her style of writing on the subject is significant. She wrote from a “certainty that she would be addressing only women,” as men would be unlikely to read a breastfeeding manual (Tebeaux and Lay 72). As a result of the lack of perceived hostility from her target audience, the argument itself could be the only source of conflict or discussion. This freedom to make the statement to others who could either agree with or dispute her allowed her to state her case “without the burden of being judged immediately inadequate because of her sex” (Tebeaux and Lay 72).

Within the same ideas of “woman’s work” from the past, we can also derive moments of inventive genius. Near the start of 1900, editor Louisa Lula Greene Richards began collecting writing for a series of columns titled “Mothers’ Work.” These columns “specifically implied advances in the application of science to everyday life,” including topics on domestic science, sanitation, health, and “the proper training of children” (Peterson 66). Richards helped to shape the way that the home was kept while also providing opportunities for other women to share their technical writing.

Women found ways of utilizing their traditional societal roles as listeners and teachers, their responsibility in the home, and even their lack of formal education to benefit them in the fields of technical communication. Two examples come in the 18th Century, in the forms of botanists Elizabeth Blackwell and Priscilla Bell Wakefield, who were “able to develop new
communicative perspectives and methods” because they were not “constrained by the established masculine conventions of their field” like their male peers (Skinner 308). Because they had no choice but to subvert expectations, they were able to grow their methods beyond the norm.

Julia W. Carpenter, a physician in the late 1800s, provides us with a fitting example of a female technical communicator who learned to “select and blend rhetorical appeals that would reassure her audience that she was properly feminine and properly professional” (Skinner 311). Through a series of three papers presented at the Cincinnati Academy of Medicine, Carpenter experimented with different approaches to sharing her research to see which would be the most successful. In 1895, she presented a paper on cysto-sarcoma in the kidney in a way that adhered to the established genre conventions of the time: providing a case report, detailing the patient’s symptoms, listing the treatments provided, and giving the outcome of the case (Skinner 314). In this first case, her presentation was criticized for matters that were “at least partially rhetorical,” rather than having her medical choices questioned (Skinner 315). The audience did not think her presentational approach was appropriate because it was masculine and she was a woman. In 1899, she again attempted a new presentational technique to the same body of scholars, this time on the topic of Hay Fever. Per Skinner’s research, “this paper’s discursive characteristics were almost literary, including artistic rather than scientific descriptions, character sketches of the people involved, and a light-hearted and occasionally humorous tone” (Skinner 316). Unlike her first foray, this approach was widely praised by her listeners. One of the most telling compliments for her research gives a telling glimpse into why this presentation may have been more successful: one male attendee believed that she presented the subject well by “putting forward no theory” and instead “leaving that part of the subject for discussion” (Skinner 317). Carpenter be-
lieved that this comment was saying that this listener was relieved that she left out the theory for
discussion because discussing theory was more appropriate for men to complete (Skinner 317).
In this rhetorical technique, Carpenter was praised for her style, but did not include as much
weighty content, therefore making it undoubtedly less fulfilling to her as an academic and a
physician. In 1896, Carpenter experimented with an additional approach that presented feminine
content in the traditional form, this time on the topic of a treatment for pulmonary tuberculosis.
For this presentation, she took a “domestic approach to medicine” by treating the condition with
an open-air treatment instead of surgery or medicine by request of the patient (Skinner 318). Be-
cause these natural subjects (“hygiene, disease prevention, and the purity of air, water, and soil”) were considered subjects of interest for female physician, her approach was regarded as inherently feminine (Skinner 319). Her research was not praised; by choosing to put her patient’s comfort above science, she “failed to perform as an assertive scientific professional” (Skinner 320).

These women serve as examples of several separate times throughout history when fe-
male inventors and communicators faced a variety of obstacles and backlash for their efforts. As
we investigate the future, their stories provide anecdotes and precedents that women in the mod-
ern workplace can use to help guide their own actions.

Avoiding Future Shadows and Absence

There are certainly changes that can be made to the field to create a more level experi-
ence across genders. The biggest impact will be made culturally: “eradicating sexism from tech-
nical writing is only possible to the extent that gender does not serve in our culture as a primary
vehicle for demarcating its citizens, their capabilities, and the tools they use for work” (Durack
While it may not be realistic to expect all sexism to be eradicated culturally in one fell swoop, there are many steps that could be taken, given the circumstances of a workplace environment. I will outline a few of them in this section.

One suggestion to better equalize technology and engineering involves becoming more aware of the way that technical communication is gendered and to take a more “techno-feminist” approach to writing for the fields. Within this suggestion, female and feminist technical communicators become “agents of the current techno-cultural context” and “create spaces of dissent to question and subvert the dominant imageries of gender and sexuality” (Pujol and Montenegro 2015). Digital rhetoric provides a solid platform for attempting this suggestion: “feminist practices of inclusivity exist in the language and design of digital tools and spaces, and function as potential inroads for disrupting commonplace masculinist notions that dominate them” (Davis 134). Given the prevalence and importance of digital communication in the modern business world, there are plenty of opportunities to embrace this techno-feminist approach and try to break down the gender barrier that exists in the workplace by highlighting and praising gender differences rather than ignoring them.

Allowing opportunities for social gathering between female coworkers can be critical to helping to create a safe environment for women in the workplace. Mentorship programs, where established women in the field mentor newer female recruits, can help bolster confidence in voice. Creating a culture where women feel comfortable speaking up for themselves and for others can be an ideal way of creating an equal workplace environment. Learning to speak up is a way for women in the workplace to establish their own agency while also helping to prevent the harassment and mistreatment that can often occur (Peterson 28-32).
Feminists and the workplace at large can empower their female employees by treating them as sources of knowledge rather than objects of study or Othering their opinions. Instead of relying on them solely for the sake of diversity in the business conversation, employers can place value on their opinions and expertise (Lay 150). There is a tendency, as when trying to diversify in any capacity, to simply think that adding women to a team is enough to equalize gender disparity. This tactic of “add woman and stir” is not enough; to truly fix the issue of inequality in the workplace, these selections must be specific, and they must be done with the intention to utilize the skillsets, voices, and experience of the women being included (Jackson 149). Furthermore, just adding women to a field because they are women “could actually make workplace conditions worse for them because men could assume that women were hired because of their gender, not their skills or expertise” (Duffus 73).

The gender issue cannot be fixed overnight. It “requires small disruptions and interventions, collective efforts toward change, and infrastructures of support” (de Hertogh et al. 12). As a culture, we must encourage women to engage in knowledge production first, and then encourage them to share that knowledge with others.

Conclusion

The history of women in the field of technical communication is clouded with missing information, ignored voices, gender expectations, and hostility. These precedents (and the lack of them, in many cases) have created an uphill climb for those who have pursued careers in technology anyway. The obstacles modern women must overcome in their education and occupations have their root in the way women were treated historically throughout the evolution of technical
communication, and the fact that these obstacles are often overlooked or treated as non-issues have only made these challenges worse.

Despite the history and obstacles faced, there are many opportunities to help end the gender disparity faced in the modern workplace. Until the culture can change, women in the field of technical communication can focus on highlighting what their gender allows them to bring to the table. They can also make efforts to engage with other women in their workplace and in other jobs within their field. Companies can support their female employees by providing mentorship programs that help bolster female voices. More importantly, companies can be sure to *listen* when their female employees speak. By treating their employees as key members of their team and utilizing their experience and knowledge, these companies can help create an environment that is welcoming and ripe with equality.

The most important action we all can take is simply to acknowledge female contribution to the field of technology and technical communication, both historically and today. Refusing to continue to silence these important voices is the best way to begin the process of breaking down the wall between the genders.
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Breaking Down Birdcages: Addressing the Negative Impacts of Standard English and Dominant Language Ideology and an Exploration of Possible Solutions

**Introduction**

Every day, educators are charged with turning the impossible into reality. They are asked to serve as guides, guardians, and confidants, and are repeatedly asked and expected to go far beyond the call of duty. Each classroom provides a brand new population of diverse students, each with their own histories and needs. Some of these needs come in the form of disabilities, others come in language barriers. How can educators honor those histories, meet those needs, and teach the lessons set out before them, all while fulfilling their many other roles in the classroom? Better yet, how can an educator accomplish these tasks in a way that values the differences that each student brings to the classroom if those differences directly contrast with the evaluative standards each student is expected to meet? The challenge can be an overwhelming one, particularly given the current climate of our world in the aftermath of immigration policies and movements like Black Lives Matter. Diversity is just as prevalent as it has always been, but conversations around inclusiveness and antiracism are constant and important, forcing educators to examine the way that they may inadvertently be feeding into racist pedagogies.
In a 2019 keynote address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Asao Inoue highlighted the racism in our country by creating a metaphor of a birdcage. He first ascribed the birdcage metaphor to the disproportionate incarceration of Black and Hispanic men over white men. He used this starting point to develop his metaphor further, talking about educational cages, specifically the way that educators correct language in the classroom. Through this process, he claimed that educators “form some of the steel bars around [their] students,” creating this cage that can sometimes limit what students can achieve (Inoue "How Do We Language..." 3). Inoue’s largely Caucasian audience for his address was forced to confront the notion that “wokeness” — a slang term for those who are politically-correct and advocate for antiracism and acceptance — is not always what it may appear to be. He accomplished his message by addressing the fact that racism in the classroom pedagogy is not always as clear-cut and identifiable: “You just thought you were doing language work, doing teaching, doing good work, judging students and their languages in conscientious and kind ways, helping them, preparing them, giving them what was good for them” (Inoue "How Do We Language..." 18). In his address, Inoue asserted that racism and White supremacy begin in the classroom, unintentionally, and are rooted in a pedagogy that inherently promotes one race over all the others. Inoue did not speak his assertions with hatred; on the contrary, his goal was to reveal racial wounds so that they could start to be healed. By identifying the problematic nature of the establishment upon which our education system was founded and continues to grow, educators can begin to change the construct of their classrooms for the better while also making them more inclusive.
The expectation in our academic and occupational world is Standard English. Educators are expected to teach to standards that clarify the expectations of this dominant dialect, and countless tools and techniques have been developed to aid them in doing so. However, if this practice creates a birdcage (as Inoue described) that entraps students who are less inclined to naturally speak the expected Standard English, should we not find ways of adjusting our approach? Moving into a future that is more reflective and respectful of diverse cultures, it is important to consider approaches that do not create steel bars around our students. By making subtle shifts in everyday teaching, educators can find ways of making their classrooms more inclusive and effective for diverse learners.

**The Standard English Dilemma on Paper**

The Standard English dialect is not a new concept: it is something linked back to England prior to the American Revolution, something that has adapted somewhat over time to become the preferred way of speaking in our country. The idea that a certain way of communicating is more proper and preferable to all others is also not a novel idea, and it has certainly prevailed as time has passed. In theory, there is nothing wrong with expecting professionalism in communication — the dilemma arises with the implication that other Englishes are not professional. This dilemma stems from the fact that the Standard English dialect does not tend to favor individuals of diverse backgrounds in the same way that it benefits the Caucasian middle and upper class. Given the dynamic demographic variety in America, this dilemma has more severe impacts than might originally seem apparent.
Standard English has an implication that to be socially accepted and successful, one must forgo any linguistic qualities that do not fall in line with what has been deemed the worthy way of speaking and writing. This implication is part of what has created a dominant language ideology in our country: the acceptable and professional way of speaking is in the Standard English dialect, and it is therefore the grammar that is taught in academia and expected in the workplace. This ideology disproportionately excludes and impacts speakers and writers of color, for whom dialect is often intrinsically tied to culture. Even though plenty of white, middle class individuals speak without using standard language, dominant language ideology “contends that minoritized dialect speakers must learn the accepted standard because it’s necessary for them to communicate in the public and at work” (Young “Nah We Straight” 68). This contention poses an important question that educators must consider: by creating a sense that “minoritized dialect speakers” will be vulnerable if they do not learn the appropriate way of communicating, have we created passive racism in our educational system while disguising it as concern? Is the claim that we are preparing students for the professional world by teaching them to speak and write “correctly” an act of unintentional prejudice?

While Standard English and core curriculum have plenty of support because they “provide students with the distilled wisdom of the Western Tradition and [will prepare] them for life,” they also suffer from their inherent tendency to “package and sell the prejudices and biases of the reigning elite and so congeal knowledge rather than advancing it” (Fish 318). The concepts of Standard English and core curriculum are argued as having an innate ability “to foster a ‘common conversation’ among students, connecting them more closely with faculty and with each other” (Fish 319). Standard English becomes a bridge to connect vastly differing
grammars from other dialects. The argument becomes whether we should prepare students with the classical knowledge that is proven to guide them towards successful careers versus teaching them in a way that challenges what has occurred before and allows them to charter a new path.

There is a compelling argument for tying race intrinsically with language, where those who turn their nose up at hearing anything spoken other than the Standard English dialect are believed to be trying to “take the nation back to a time when we were less tolerant of linguistic and racial differences” (Young “Should Writers…” 61). In this argument, it is not language that makes a person oppressed: instead, oppression is due to “the way folks with some power perceive other people’s language” (Young “Should Writers…” 62). Jacquelyn Royster puts this experience into perspective:

I have been compelled on too many occasions to count to sit as a well-mannered Other, silently, in a state of tolerance that requires me to be as expressionless as I can manage, while colleagues who occupy a place of entitlement different from my own talk about the history and achievements of people from my ethnic group, or even about their perceptions of our struggles. I have been compelled to listen as they have comfortably claimed the authority to engage in the construction of knowledge and meaning about me and mine. … I have come to recognize, however, that when the subject matter is me and the voice is not mine, my sense of order and rightness is disrupted (Royster 30-31).

Returning to Inoue’s metaphor, Royster describes herself not unlike a bird trapped in a cage, powerless to stop her story from being shared by those who are not entitled to it. Like a bird, she finds herself on display, discussed by those who have deemed themselves experts on how she must feel and think.
Royster’s experience is not anomalous — it is part of the same establishment that continues to claim, as she goes on to state, that “Columbus has discovered America and claims it now, claims it still for a European crown” (Royster 31). This metaphor, and her anecdote within it, mirrors the experience of many non-white students in our classrooms, who have scraps of their own culture and history tossed to them periodically during times like Black History Month while simultaneously having their culture and way of speaking degraded as a ‘wrong’ form of English. The dominant power has decided that Standard English is the correct way to speak, and anything else is unacceptable and should be fixed.

The Standard Language Dilemma in Practice

To fully understand the implications of how Standard English and dominant language ideology can negatively impact students, it can help to view specific anecdotes. This process can take the theoretical discussion of the dilemma and put faces to it, which is a tactic that those who fall on the side of opposing Standard English often use. Wheeler and Thomas provide three examples of students who faced discrimination due to their way of speaking.

In the first, a second-grade child’s teacher is alarmed to learn than the child’s previous teacher assumed she was non-verbal rather than trying to work with her African American Vernacular English. Instead of teaching the student how to read or write, her first-grade teacher instead gave her coloring books and sat her in the corner (Wheeler and Thomas 369). Due to her teacher’s prejudice, this child was deprived of an opportunity to learn simply because of her way of speaking. As a result, she was treated like a disabled student, even though her learning delay was primarily due to her previous teacher’s lack of faith in her abilities based on prejudice.
The second example describes an eighth-grade student who spoke and wrote enthusiastically with beautiful details and comparisons. Instead of noticing these poetic qualities of the student’s writing, her teacher could not see past the perceived errors. Her teacher was unable to comprehend the grammar of African American Vernacular English and how it was different from Standard English “mistakes.” Because she could only apply the student’s work through the “lens of dominant language ideology,” the teacher “misassessed her student’s writing, literacy knowledge, and needs” while entirely missing (and thus not properly encouraging) the quality of the details (Wheeler and Thomas 369). This unfortunate perception is the exact sort of occurrence that forever shifts a student’s connection to learning and sharing their work. This eighth-grade student received no praise for her work, something that could potentially result in her contributing less effort towards it in the future.

The final example describes a male student whose reading ability was incorrectly assessed due to his teacher’s inability to understand phonetic, morphological, and syntactic patterns of African American Vernacular English. As a result, his perceived reading level was dropped: he had started the year reading on the appropriate grade level but ended it below it because of this incorrectly evaluated test. This false assessment meant he would have to partake in remediation activities that were unnecessary instead of getting the targeted and engaging instruction that he deserved (Wheeler and Thomas 371). What a tragic blow to this student’s success: this simple act of incorrect assessment labelled him a struggling reader, a label that could potentially have lasting impacts on him.

These three anecdotes bring to light what are unfortunately extremely common occurrences in our classrooms. Because educators are trained only to seek out and teach Standard
English as the dominant language ideology, they are ill-equipped to identify the qualities of other language varieties present in their classroom. The various evaluative tools at their disposal, such as reading tests that require a child to read aloud in order to assess comprehension and literacy, do not account for dialect-based grammatical differences. As in the case of the third student, these differences typically register as errors when considered against Standard English rules. However, can an ‘error’ made in Standard English that is actually a grammatical construct of a completely different variety of language truly be considered an error?

To explore this question, one must consider the experiences of students in English as a Second Language programs. In the United States, most students in ESL or English Language Learning (ELL) programs at schools speak Spanish as their first language. Through their instruction through these programs at school, they are learning a new language rather than acquiring it, which is the unconscious process we undergo when learning to speak as small children. Teachers who fight to then teach these students to use Standard English are “asking students to apply language learning to supplant language acquisition” (Williams 228). It is an impossible task to ask a student learning a brand new language that is vastly different from their own to also learn to use it with the unique and fickle grammatical rules and expectations in mind. Returning to our question of errors — it could not be considered a Standard English error for a native Spanish speaker to substitute a Spanish word for an unfamiliar English word. It is, instead, a part of the process of learning the new language. Telling an English language learner that they have made a grammatical mistake in a language they barely know will (at best) mean extraordinarily little to the student and (at worst) be a hit to their confidence. Because these students are already wrapped up in the vulnerable position of trying to learn a completely
unfamiliar grammar and language, it is important to ensure that the process is full of positive reinforcement rather than highlighting only errors.

**Solving the Dilemma**

After understanding that there are efforts that can be made to make the teaching of grammar in the classroom a more inclusive act, the next step is to consider ways that this action can be accomplished. Fortunately, the Standard English dilemma is not a new topic of research and conversation, meaning that there are many resources to pull from to solve the problem at hand. Given the varying viewpoints on the subject, there are plenty of different theories on how to properly solve the dilemma. By utilizing the research and efforts of other educators and scholars who have worked in a variety of ways to tackle the problematic nature of dominant language ideology, educators potentially find a method that may work well within their own classroom.

One common suggestion to solve the issue of whether or not to teach Standard English instead of a more diverse language and grammar is to utilize code-switching, which is “the use of more than one language or language variety concurrently in conversation” (Young “Nah We Straight” 49). However, scholars like Vershawn Young believe emphatically that code-switching is not the language blending it is believed to be, but rather a form of language conversation instead. Young asserts that the direct connection between language and race makes them too intertwined to be examined without each other. He considers it to be an example of linguistic segregation that “blacks [are expected to] develop a dual personality” by “acting and speaking one way with whites, another with blacks” (Young “Nah We Straight” 56). Essentially, Young
argues that code-switching requires speakers of nonstandard English to put on masks in order to communicate, and this requirement is racist.

A counter-opinion to the idea that code-switching is a form of linguistic segregation takes a “global approach” that includes the idea of style shifting, which involves “shifting language choices as appropriate to the setting” (Wheeler and Thomas 380). An example of this would be the way one might greet different individuals: a greeting to an authority figure is likely different than how one would greet a friend or how you might interact with a parent. This approach is clearly similar to the common code-switching idea, but it focuses instead on diglossia. Diglossia is defined as “the global division of language into High and Low varieties” (Wheeler and Thomas 381). Truthfully, diglossia and code-switching feel fairly similar: both refer to the idea that there are certain ways that are appropriate to speak in certain situations. High variety language is appropriate for formal and professional circumstances, and Low variety language is better suited to casual situations. The difference appears to be that the focus is linguistic rather than social. In this approach, educators “use the lever of linguistic knowledge to lift up the heavy boulder of daily classroom practice that discriminates” against students who do not naturally speak the standard language (Wheeler and Thomas 381).

Research on the subject second-language acquisition has determined that it “relies largely on meaningful input” rather than formal instruction (Williams 230). These results are excellent support for providing opportunities for ESL and ELL students to have opportunities to interact with native English speakers in casual settings in the classroom. Giving students from diverse cultures, dialects, and languages opportunities to interact with one another without the pressure of ‘correctness’ is likely to be far more successful than taking a verbal or physical red pen to
their efforts and trying to apply the rules of Standard English to grammars to which they do not apply.

Another helpful step towards inclusion in the classroom is for teachers to actively engage in understanding the grammatical structures of the more prevalent dialects in their classrooms. For example, African American Vernacular English grammar has specific rules that regularly come into play. These include an omission of the *s* suffix on present-tense verbs, though sometimes the speaker overcorrects due to the sentence pattern (Williams 241). AAVE also drops *g* from participles and adds the verb form *be* to stretch a verb when the speaker intends to indicate a longer span of time (Williams 242). It can be extremely helpful for an educator to know what an error in Standard English versus a true facet of the student’s primary dialect. In an environment where the Standard English dialect remains an integral part of what students are expected to learn in school, knowing the difference between an error and a quality of the student’s dialect can help a teacher properly address the ‘mistake’ being made in a way that does not disrespect the student’s culture.

In his article written entirely in African American Vernacular English, Vershawn Young suggests teaching language descriptively: “this mean we should, for instance, teach how language functions within and from various cultural perspectives. And we should teach what it take to understand, listen, and write in multiple dialects simultaneously. We should teach how to let dialects comingle (Young “Should Writers…” 65). He goes on to suggest the process of code-meshing as a way to blend dialects together to “add flavor and style” and make writing more real (Young “Should Writers…” 68). Young’s suggestion takes the concept of code-switching and gives it the opportunity to become more inclusive. He describes his concept of code-meshing as a
way of speaking that “doesn’t require students to ‘hold back their Englishes’ but permits them to bring them more forcefully and strategically forward” (Young “Nah We Straight” 62). Essentially, it provides a way for Standard English to coexist with other dialogues in a way that does not hold one dialect above any others. His suggestion has some merit — if our goal is to have student voices shine through in their writing, this sounds like a potential way to do that. Of course, the problem continues to be the standard-based expectation of understanding the proper English grammar. Unfortunately, the only real solution to this would be the monumental task of completely changing the standards of English grammar from the ground up. Since this task would take some time to completely, it is imperative that teachers make what adjustments they can within their own classrooms.

Another potential method for helping to ease the conflict between Standard English and other dialects present in the classroom could be through the use of “language of power,” a concept that allows for an easy path into discussions of racism and privilege. Through this idea, Standard English could continue to be taught, but with the context of its role as the dominant language ideology and what that means. In practice, this concept begins with encouraging students to identify language as a construct that is given power by whoever has authority. The authority figure determines correctness; there is no “inherent value” in one language over another, and Standard English is not the prestige dialect because it is the best (Flynn 28). A unit on language of power can involve the reading of a text that utilizes a different dialect or language, particularly if the text is a dramatic text written in script format to allow for ease of reading aloud. In one example of a unit of this type, students extended their learning by writing a monologue in a dialect and then created a list of rules for the dialect they had used. After
switching rule sets, the students attempted to rewrite their monologue using the new set of rules (Flynn 29). This activity helped the students involved to identify and engage with “issues of language and power and ideas about ethnocentrism and culture” (Flynn 30). As a result, students gained a better understanding of the grammars of different dialects while also gaining a respect for the cultures from which those dialects originate. Additionally, the “language of power” unit provided students with an understanding of how one language may become dominant over others in an area, regardless of how prevalent the alternate languages happen to be.

The use of labor-based grading provides another opportunity for leveling the dialectic playing field in the English classroom. If graded based on labor rather than in a traditional format, students who do not speak the Standard English dialect natively are immediately put into a much safer territory for academic growth. Labor-based grading “helps most students of color and multilingual students perform well in writing classes” (Inoue “Approaching Antiracist...” 178). If students are graded based on how hard they try, rather than their ability to correctly guess a grammar that directly conflicts with their native dialect or language, it puts them into a better position to achieve success like their peers. It also empowers students to want to learn for the sake of understanding rather than purely in pursuit of the Almighty A. As Asao Inoue states, “when we value quality, particularly by assigning grades by using judgments of quality, we have no control over the valuing labor or processes; yet when we value labor and processes, we have an equally challenging time valuing quality (as compared to a dominant discourse) as an outcome or artifact” (Inoue “Approaching Antiracist...” 185). Utilizing labor-based assessment allows teachers to reward effort and provide feedback in a way that is inherently antiracist.
Another more significant suggestion is to encourage a culture of listening within the
classroom. In order for steps to be made towards the direction of inclusivity, “some must be
silent” and “leave enough space between utterances” so that marginalized voices have the
opportunity to speak up for themselves (Inoue "How Do We Language..." 18). Teaching those
who benefit from the “language of power” and who natively speak the prestige dialect of
Standard English to occasionally stay silent so that their peers have a chance to share their own
dialect and culture can be a way to encourage cross-cultural understanding and empathy. This
idea can feel counterintuitive to classroom discussion: why would we encourage any student to
stay silent? However, in our current political environment, where so many marginalized people
are struggling to find their voice and share their story, it is important to develop citizens who
understand how to lift up those who are not as privileged as they are. The process of listening
and staying silent is a way for students to learn at an early age how to be effective allies and
supporters of those who may need it most. In this way, the dominant language ideology has an
opportunity to shift away from an inherently racist and problematic foundation and grow into
something that has the potential to be truly inclusive of diverse people and cultures.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is difficult (if not impossible) to truly determine whether or not the
existence and prevalence of Standard English is a part of a racist educational establishment or
merely a way to level the playing field and allow all students to become successful. Regardless,
it remains important for our country and educational system to “articulate codes of behavior that
can sustain more concretely notions of honor, respect, and good manners across [cultural]
boundaries” (Royster 33). The first step to accomplishing a true respect for individuals across cultural boundaries is for educators to first acknowledge the issues at play within their classrooms. The Standard English dilemma is divisive, with valid points on either side. Despite the varying pushes towards more inclusive approaches to grammar, it is truthfully unlikely that Standard English is going anywhere any time soon.

That said, there is one side of the argument that comes from a place of feeling excluded and unwanted. In this case, whether or not an educator believes that there is nothing wrong with dominant language ideology and Standard English becomes irrelevant: we simply cannot knowingly allow students to feel excluded and unwanted without finding some way to assist. It is important to realize that “when a teacher steps into her classroom and people are present in all their diverse complexities, when students write and do all that they do, when our lives as teachers become tangled in the day-to-day workings of a course and academic life,” the undeniable ‘racist patterns’ of academia become a lot easier to overlook (Inoue “Approaching Antiracist...” 177). By acknowledging the occasionally problematic nature of what we teach in our classrooms, educators can become more equipped to make sure that no students are locked in linguistic birdcages in the future.
Works Cited


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