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Traumatized Voices: The Transformation of Personal Trauma into Public Writing During the Romantic Era

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Traumatized Voices: The Transformation of Personal Trauma into Public Writing

During the Romantic Era

by

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A DISSERTATION

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Beginning as early as the 1790s and continuing throughout the nineteenth century, it is possible to trace in British literature a distinctive line of fascination among authors with what we now understand to be trauma and its profound effects on the lives and behaviors of its victims/survivors. With today’s neurological proof of the changes that take place in the brains of traumatized individuals, it stands to reason that these changes have taken place in every century, not just the century in which we have had the technology to view it or the vocabulary to describe it. This means that psychological trauma is biologically and psychologically universal. Using Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* and empathetic readings, this study examines the personal traumas of several authors as related in their private writings and traces the transformation of that private trauma into the authors’ published works. The study examines traumatic grief, the results of an unsuccessful grieving process, and the possible traumatic captivity of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and how they manifest in “Rime of the Ancient Mariner;” traumatic loss combined with the dissociation cultivated by William Godwin as an abused child is discussed in conjunction with the writing of *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; Mary Shelley’s many traumatic interpersonal relationships and the unique view they provided into the victimology of *Frankenstein;*. 
and the role of empathy in creating healing relationships and in recovering from traumas in the lives of Charles and Mary Lamb along with the difference between sympathy and empathy in authors. Coleridge’s “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” is used as the example for sympathetic writing and Charles Lamb’s “Christ’s Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago” is used as the example of empathetic writing. As a whole, this study proposes that empathetic readings when combined with a trauma theory lens provide new insights into Romantic works.
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The views expressed in this study are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.
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Introduction

By the end of the eighteenth century, medical science was emerging from a comparatively primitive and often superstitious view of both the human body and the human mind and was beginning to embrace a more sophisticated understanding that was rooted in eighteenth-century investigations not only of anatomy, physiology, and medicine but also of psychology and human behavior. Early Romantic writers like William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Barbauld, and Charlotte Smith were among the first to incorporate into their works the new insights into human behavior that were emerging from the studies of scientists like David Hartley, Humphrey Davy, David Hume, and F.J. Gall. Richard Holmes, in The Age of Wonder, shows how involved authors like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and even Lord Byron were with prominent scientists Joseph Banks, William Hershel, and Humphrey Davy. Beginning as early as the 1790s and continuing throughout the nineteenth century, it is possible to trace in British literature a distinctive line of fascination among authors with what we now understand to be trauma and its profound effects on the lives and behaviors of its victims/survivors.

The Implications of Individual Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Most literary scholars consider trauma studies relatively recent; however, Charles R. Figley, one of the leading researchers in the early days of traumatic stress studies,
traced the first mention of trauma and its connections to “hysterical reactions” to ancient Egypt. These physicians reported their findings in 1900 B.C.E. in Kunyus Papyrus, which is one of the earliest medical textbooks (xvii). Figley, who helped found The Journal of Traumatic Stress, defines the study of trauma, or traumatology, as “the investigation and application of knowledge about the immediate and long-term psychosocial consequences of highly stressful events and the factors which affect those consequences” and attributes the growth in the field to the understanding that different fields of scholarly studies and patient therapy were converging around the theme of traumatic stress (xvii). The next figure to study trauma was John Erichsen, a British physician in the 1860s, who noticed that victims of railway accidents suffered from a trauma syndrome. However, Erichsen attributed the syndrome to either shock or spinal concussion (Leys 3). This was the first time that trauma was associated with a physical injury, but not the last. In fact, the word “trauma” in English initially meant “a wound, or external bodily injury in general,” and was first used in English in 1694; although, it is important to note that the word “trauma” derives from the German “traum,” which translates as dream (OED). In Trauma: A Genealogy, Ruth Leys pinpoints the origin of the psychological meaning of trauma to the fin de siècle of the 19th century, and the Oxford English Dictionary traces the first psychological use of the word to William James in Psychological Review, where he writes: “Certain reminiscences of the shock fall into the subliminal consciousness, where they can only be discovered in ‘hypnoid’ states. If left there, they act as permanent ‘psychic traumata,’ thorns in the spirit, so to speak.” (qtd in OED, 199). Leys attributes the shift in meaning to trauma as a “wounding of the mind” to the works of J.M. Charcot, Pierre Janet, Alfred Binet, Morton Prince,
Josef Breuer, and Sigmund Freud (orig. emphasis, 3-4). Freud famously attributed
psychic trauma and the associated repression of memory to seduction in childhood but, in
1897, turned his back on his theory of seduction to focus on the importance of repressed
infantile erotic wishes and fantasies; therefore, as Leys posits, Freud denied “the
significance of actual trauma on the individual psyche” (4).

Both Leys and Figley point to World War I (WWI) as the next step in the
development of trauma theory, but where Figley sees the development as a more direct
linear progression, Leys points out that trauma studies developed in fits and starts as
wartime psychological casualties brought trauma to public notice only to be “forgotten”
in the inter-war periods and as a result she claims the field “lacks cohesion” to this day
(6). WWI resulted in the need to treat thousands of men who were dealing with the
trauma of what was called “shell-shock” and the efforts were further confused and
complicated because many of the men were not diagnosed or did not manifest symptoms
of the trauma until three years after armistice (Bonikowski 517). During the post-WWI
trauma cycle, the Freudian concept of dissociation and the Breuer-Freud cathartic method
were the primary ideology and treatments used. The association of war hysteria with
female hysteria tainted many soldiers’ reputations, and the soldiers were often accused of
malingering (Scull 168-69). Physicians, military leadership, and the civilian population
often discounted psychic wounds because they were not visible (Hunt 21). As the WWI
recovery efforts came to an end, so did the interest in psychological war trauma. Sándor
Ferenczi, a Hungarian psychoanalyst, and Abram Kardiner are considered the only two
researchers who continued to work on the subject during this period (Kalsched 119;
Herman 23).
The advent of World War II (WWII) reawakened some interest in war trauma, which was then called “combat fatigue” (Hunt 11). Post-WWII independent researchers studied “concentration camp syndrome” or “survivor syndrome” in non-combatants; however, at that point, the two types of trauma were considered separate areas of study (Leys 5). The physicians and psychoanalysts working with war veterans depended on drug catharsis therapy to treat the veterans (Skull 168). During this timeframe, war-related psychic trauma was still widely considered a manifestation of weaker individuals so after the fighting ended, interest in trauma ended as well. It was not until social workers, psychiatrists, and veterans’ activists waged what Leys calls an “essentially political struggle” in the post-Vietnam War era that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was officially entered into the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition, (DSM-III) in 1980 (5). In the 1990s more evidence for PTSD was gathered from the field of neurobiology and the work of Dr. Bessel A. van der Kolk. Leys viewed this development with skepticism and frustration in 2000. Leys felt that connecting psychic trauma to a physical injury was a step backwards in traumatic studies and stated that the memory research was of “dubious validity” (7). However, the immense amount of PTSD information available to researchers post-9/11, and as more and more civilians, soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines return from Afghanistan and Iraq with PTSD symptoms, has corroborated van der Kolk’s hypothesis, and his theory is now readily accepted by major figures in the trauma field including Judith Herman who was one of the first researchers to work with PTSD in abused women and children (Herman 238). Of course, one reason Leys is suspicious of van der Kolk and his colleagues is that she feels theories that support the
“objective changes in the brain” also “tend to eliminate the issue of moral meaning and ethical assessment” because both victims and perpetrators can be shown to be suffering from PTSD (7). On some levels this may be true, but Leys sees trauma as more concrete than it actually is. To her, psychological or social-psychological trauma is distinct from biological trauma. This cannot be the case though, or else psychologists would not believe that trauma would respond to medications. Today most professionals agree that a combination of therapy and medication is the best treatment method to ameliorate the trauma—and the brain scans support them, proving, in my opinion, a biological or physiological connection with psychic trauma.

With the addition of non-war trauma survivors to the definition of PTSD, the definition in the 1992 *DSM-IV* came under more scrutiny, and in 2000, *DSM-IV Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)* was published. The PTSD definition was rewritten to leave out the phrase “out of the ordinary,” which had been the determining factor in diagnosing PTSD, but it was also the phrase that caused advocates the most frustration. The phrase was used in court cases to dismiss the claims of abused and/or assaulted women because, statistically, their experience was not “out of the ordinary” experience for a woman in current society (Brown 110). The new *DSM-IV-TR* definition of PTSD now reads:

The essential feature of [PTSD] is the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death,
serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or close associate (Criterion A1). The person’s response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (or in children, the response must involve disorganized or agitated behavior) (Criterion A2). The characteristic symptoms resulting from the exposure to the extreme trauma include persistent reexperiencing of the traumatic event (Criterion B), persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness (Criterion C), and persistent symptoms of increased arousal (Criterion D). The full symptom picture must be present for more than 1 month (Criterion E), and the disturbance must cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (Criterion F). (463)

In addition, *DSM-IV-TR* includes important language in the definition, explaining, “[traumatic] events that are experienced directly include, but are not limited to, military combat, violent personal assault” (emphasis added, 463). This small phrase, “but not limited to,” means that as long as the patient meets the criteria for PTSD, the event experienced was coded in that patient’s mind as traumatic. The number of PTSD cases from both stressors of human design—i.e. perpetrated by one human against another—and stressors from naturally occurring events—i.e. tsunamis and hurricanes—led to another important recognition in the new definition: “The disorder may be especially severe or long lasting when the stressor is of human design” (464). The field of traumatology is still extremely fluid and many psychologists and psychiatrists, like Hunt, are calling for more stringent categories. Hunt would like war trauma, whether the
sufferer is military or civilian, to be moved to a separate diagnosis from PTSD because “PTSD covers only a proportion of the symptoms experienced by people suffering from war trauma” (59). As information on psychological trauma increases, the definition will continue to evolve in order to become more exact.

The definition of trauma is important in today’s society because the definition is linked with issues of legal liability and entitlements. If sufferers’ symptoms are included in the current definition, the traumatized are able to receive treatments and benefits at the expense of the government, the insurance companies, and possibly even the perpetrator of the trauma. This is one of the reasons that so much focus is paid to wording and the inclusion or exclusion of symptoms by each of the above experts in their respective fields. However, the amount of attention devoted to the definition and the timeline of the formalization of trauma tend to make many people, including some scholars, believe that trauma is a modern illness. That is not the case. Leading medical and psychological historians such as Andrew Scull, Edward Shorter, and the late Roy Porter have made careers out of tracing treatments for traumatized individuals throughout history.

The Great Debate

Currently, a debate rages in literary criticism, a debate that is as passionate as the Romantic debate between materialism and the soul. The modern debate is over whether or not one can use contemporary psychiatric notions, in my case those dealing with trauma, on literary characters and/or their authors or if one can only work within the
historical notions of the brain and psyche formed in the relevant period. Joel Faflak in his 2008 book, *Romantic Psychoanalysis*, which explores Faflak’s assumption that “Romanticism’s concern with the trauma of self-identity is one of the ways it coheres as an historical entity, but that this historical identity is always subject to the psychoanalysis that is so much a part of its emergence, a psychoanalysis that both consolidates Romantic identity and places it under erasure” and believes that we can and should use modern ideas of psychology (5). He claims that “Romantic psychoanalysis” emerges “in the metaphorical and seemingly unclinical terrain of poetry” and believes that “Romantic poetry by confronting the unconscious of philosophy, *invents* psychoanalysis” (orig. emphasis. 5, 7). David Vallins also argues for this camp in his 2001 work, *Coleridge and the Psychology of Romanticism*. Vallins believes that Coleridge’s poetry, philosophy, and critical theory “express with unusual intensity a characteristically Romantic sense of alienation, and an associated desire to rediscover a sense of unity between the self and its social or physical environment” (2). This “flight from alienation into ideals of unity,” Vallins believes, makes Coleridge’s work “particularly representative of the psychological patterns that characterize Romanticism more generally” and makes him “the ultimate exemplar of Romantic psychology in the most important senses we can give to that expression” (3, 10).

Jill Matus, in her 2009 *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction*, is the most recent advocate of the other camp, which believes contemporary psychiatric notions are unable to apply fully to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works. Matus states, “I am critical of attempts to apply trauma theory as a set of transcendent truths about the ways the mind functions” (7). However, at the same time she admits, “I think
[trauma theory] may, in its various incarnations, usefully open up a range of questions that shape historical and literary inquiry” and uses “the questions about self and consciousness that animate trauma theory” in order to “recover and illuminate the array of specifically Victorian ideas about the mind and its operation in the aftermath of emotional shock” (7). Matus’ main concern is the “recent trend in literary criticism deploying trauma theory” in which “the retrospective diagnosis of anguished fictional subjects” is used “as if trauma were a timeless and historically transcendent category” (8). In her introduction and argument, though, she does seem to understand that at least the vocabulary of modern psychology is needed in order to convey her ideas to readers.

With this study, I am wading into that heated debate with my standard hoisted high (and plenty of padded armor) and proposing a third position. My position is based on my own background as a United States Air Force Sexual Assault Response Coordinator, the civilian equivalent of a Rape Crisis Center coordinator/advocate; working with injured airmen and family members of deceased airmen in the Air Force Casualty office; and on the recent role of neurobiology plays in trauma studies. I worked with traumatized clients and vicariously traumatized staff members on a daily basis and noticed that, despite very different personalities and experiences, there were commonalities in the traumatized individuals, which made it easier to help them once identified. With the influx of patients suffering from Post-Traumatic-Stress Disorder (PTSD), the functional magnetic resonance imagery (MRI), the electroencephelopgraphic (EEG), magnetoencephography (MEG), and single photon emission computerized technology (SPECT) evidence is adding up in proof that trauma fundamentally changes the way the brain works, as noted above. In January of 2010, researchers from the
University of Minnesota and the Minneapolis Veterans’ Affairs Medical Center announced that using MEG, they could diagnose PTSD correctly in ninety-four percent of non-medicated patients (seventeen of eighteen were correctly diagnosed) and ninety-eight percent of the medicated patients (one out of fifty-six was misclassified) (Georgopoulos et al 5-6). Trauma, in essence, re-wires the brain—making connections between the left frontal lobe’s higher processing and the hypothalamus more concrete and visible on scans. As early as 1995 (in the study that upset Leys), researchers showed that PTSD decreased hippocampal volume by between eight and twenty-six percent because of the “heightened levels of cortisol [produced in trauma survivors] which is known to be toxic to the hippocampus” (van der Kolk 233). In addition, researchers documented that there was “heightened activity in only in the right hemisphere,” especially the amygdala, and “most significantly Broca’s area [located in the left hemisphere and responsible for translating personal experience into communicable language] ‘turned-off’” (233). With the neurological proof of the changes that take place in the brains of traumatized individuals, it stands to reason that these changes have taken place in every century, not just the century in which we have had the technology with which to view it or the vocabulary with which to describe it. This, to me, means that psychological trauma is biologically and psychologically universal.

When ascribing trauma to literary characters or writers of the Romantic era, one must concentrate not only on “shock” as Matus does, but also on symptoms of “hysteria” in terms of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century vocabulary. One also needs to remember how conversant the English, especially the Londoners, became with what passed as psychiatric treatments, both behavioral and pharmaceutical, because of George III’s
occasional lapses into “madness.” England was more aware and more sympathetic to the causes and effects of madness than any other country of that time (Masters 58). Because the king’s illness and the treatments for that illness were items in the daily news and because his recoveries were reason for celebrating, the English began to believe for the first time that madness could be cured (MacAlpine and Hunter 276). This belief enabled the growth of asylums and also encouraged the search for treatments (Porter 178). This is evidence that some rudimentary knowledge of the mind/brain was general knowledge. Coleridge studied J. G. Spurzheim, David Hartley, Joseph Priestley, and F. J. Gall, to name just a few of the philosophers and scientists who were attempting to discern how the mind/brain functions. Gall is now considered the father of neurobiology because he was the first to recognize that the brain had different “organs” which were responsible for different functions. From their letters, it is also apparent that Lamb and Wordsworth were familiar with the scientific theories through Coleridge. Alan Richardson argues that “no account of Romantic subjectivity can be complete without noting how contemporary understandings of psychology were either grounded in, deeply marked by” the brain-based science of the day, even if the author was “tacitly” or explicitly “opposed to” it (2). He points out that many themes and concerns of Romanticism “reveal unsuspected facets and interconnections when placed in the context of contemporary work on the brain and nerves” (2). However to ensure that a study of psychological trauma is thorough, I believe literary scholars must allow the same methods that medical and psychiatric historians use and allow that the symptoms generally attributed to trauma today were present in prior centuries. The most prominent symptoms of trauma have changed little since asylum doctors, and later Freud, began cataloguing them in the sixteenth century,
and they are present in the current *DSM-IV-TR* definition already noted. However, I also believe that attributing the invention of psychoanalysis to Romanticism is flawed because, while the methods may be eerily similar, the Romantic writers were not really seeking to heal the minds of traumatized or “mad” individuals as much as they were trying to explore/explain their own struggles and their period’s struggles.

This self-exploration helped autobiographical writing become more popular during the Romantic era. Eugene Stelzig writes that:

> there was a veritable explosion of autobiographical writing, both poetry and prose, in England and on the continent. What accounts for this outpouring is not easy to determine: there are many factors at work here, not the least of which is the changing situation of the literary marketplace as well as the commercial realities of the publication and consumption of books as these reflect growing rates of literacy and a rising middle class able to purchase these [writings]. (3)

In turn, these purchasers were “interested in personal narratives of all kinds” (3). Unlike Romantic era readers, modern readers expect autobiography to be “true.” As Stephen C. Behrendt explains,

> authenticity has to do with the first-handedness of the account, with the reader’s (or listener’s) conviction that the author can legitimately base her or his account to a significant extent on the fact of having been present at the events being described. With autobiographical writing, of course, this should be a given, and this is why it becomes so interesting to observe authors insisting nevertheless on buttressing their accounts with details
designed to create or enhance this particular sort of authenticity, even at the very time that they may well be doing their best to lie to, evade, and otherwise manipulate their audience. (150)

The lines between fiction and non-fiction, however, were blurred at this point in history. As Stelzig points out, *Jane Eyre* was subtitled “An Autobiography,” and, as will be seen, current biographers and literary scholars of Coleridge and Charles Lamb treat Lamb’s essays, narrated by the fictional Elia, as autobiography (3). To further complicate and intrigue readers—both those contemporary to the Romantics and those of today—any time one mentions autobiography, the psychological aspect of the work is also invoked, whether the narrator of the “autobiography” is a historical figure or a fictional character. Behrendt explains this tendency: “It is probably inevitable that we ‘read into’ first-person works of fiction (whether poetry or prose) the biographical circumstances of their authors, in part because our culture characteristically invests first-person narratives with an inordinate presumption of veracity, especially when these narratives come to us in print” (157). I would like to suggest that this assumption of veracity, when compared with letters and journal entries, can give critics insight to the writers’ psyches, at which point we must turn to modern psychology to explain what we see. Richardson proposes the best solution, I believe, to the current debate/dilemma:

I have become convinced that informed comparison with models, findings, and controversies from the present are needed to help bring certain Romantic-era developments and debates into focus. It is less a matter of insisting on resemblance than of listening for resonance, and allowing that
resonance to help reopen avenues for scholarly investigation that have long remained untrodden. (3)

This resonance between Romantic writing, both private and public, is especially apparent using a trauma theory lens, as I hope this study will show.

**Empathetic Versus Sympathetic**

In addition to the debate over use of psychology, my study also challenges the viewpoint of some historians and sociologists such as Nigel C. Hunt, in his otherwise excellent book *Memory, War and Trauma*, in which he states that “[p]eople in previous eras did not only describe things differently—they were different” (14). Hunt then continues saying that because people in earlier centuries “were brought up to behave in particular ways” and “were used to death in a way that few people in the West are now used to,” these people had “different attitudes and beliefs” towards death (14). Hunt’s statement is too generalized and is refuted by such nineteenth century works as Mary Shelley’s *Journal of Sorrows*, which she created as a repository for her traumatic grief after the consecutive loss of her two young children and Percy Bysshe Shelley within three short years. This statement is further refuted by Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A. H. H.*—written after the death of his beloved Arthur Hallam and much of William Wordworth’s *Prelude* which constantly, almost reflexively, reworks the loss of his parents. These works support the current theory of trauma which believes that *only the individual* can determine what is or is not traumatic in his or her own life—just because
the situation was not traumatic for everyone, does not mean that it was not traumatic for one individual. Trauma, especially traumatic loss, during the Romantic era is supported by medical historian Edward Schorter’s explanation that the family as an emotional unit became more and more important beginning in the later part of the eighteenth century, especially in families existing above the subsistence level, as before that time, family was “based more on ties of property and lineage than sentiment” (50). Because sentiments were more engaged, the deaths of children and loved friends and family members were more traumatic. We as readers and critics must allow the authors and characters to tell us what they see as traumatic experiences. Authors tell us about their traumas in their letters and journals; characters tell us about their traumatic experiences through their actions, dialogue, and inner-narrative.

I believe that, as readers and as critics, we must read the work of authors empathically and not simply sympathetically. The Oxford English Dictionary defines sympathy as “the quality or state of being affected by the condition of another with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other; the fact or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of another or others; fellow-feeling. Also, a feeling or frame of mind evoked by and responsive to some external influence. Const. with (a person, etc., or a feeling)” (OED). It defines empathy as “the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation” (OED). At first reading the difference between the two words is slight; in fact, many people use them interchangeably. However, the difference between the two words is one of immense importance when speaking in psychological terms. When people read or observe sympathetically, they keep a distance between themselves and the subject. Sympathetic
readers and observers use adjectives such as “poor” with the individual’s name. They may believe they are reading the text, individual, or situation empathetically, but the ability/willingness to pass judgment and decide that someone or some situation is “poor” or someone/thing to be pitied shows that the people who are reading/observing are judging the situation from their own points of view and through their own experiences. Throughout this text, I will repeat that the individual who believes he or she has been traumatized is the only one who can decide what is or is not traumatic. This is the heart of reading a text, individual, or situation empathetically. One is willing to essentially enter into the mind and emotions of the individual and see the situation as that particular individual sees it—without one’s own personal viewpoints or experiences creating a barrier and providing distance. At this point it may be helpful to consider a modern day example.

A client I with whom I worked several years ago had been raised by a mother who was a drug addict. In order to finance her addiction, the mother was willing to trade sexual favors from either herself or her daughter, who was seven years old at the time. This young girl learned very early in life that by engaging in sexual activities with men, she made her mother happy and “proud” of her and that her basic needs (i.e. food and shelter) would be met. Therefore, as a young woman she continued this learned behavior. She had a difficult time telling young men that she was not interested in sex and did not understand what personal boundaries were (or that boundaries were a positive thing to possess) when it involved sexual behavior. This led to other young women thinking she was sexually lax, or “slutty” and to young men taking sexual advantage of her. A sympathetic reading of her situation would lead one to feel sorry for her and, most
likely, to feel horrified that a child would experience what she did. Sympathy is not inappropriate in this situation, but it makes it difficult to help or understand the young woman and her actions. An empathetic reading of her situation would understand that the young woman’s idea of what is considered acceptable sexual behavior was formed as a seven-year-old child. It would see her actions and beliefs through her eyes and keep the pity and horror out of the situation. Empathetic understanding of this young woman makes it easier to help her find a way to build barriers, if she wishes to do so, because she knows she is not being judged or pitied. Probably more importantly, empathy does not demand that someone change to fit a perceived “normal;” it does not have any expectations. Sympathy, on the other hand, expects that individual to embrace what the sympathetic person considers societal norms and mores; it expects some one to heal or overcome their inadequacies on a timeline of the sympathetic person’s choosing. I will address this difference further in chapter four and will provide examples of the difference between empathy and sympathy in the works of Charles Lamb and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Again, I am not arguing that Lamb, Coleridge or any of the other authors considered in this study were conversant with modern trauma theory, nor am I arguing that these authors invented trauma theory, although Coleridge and William Godwin come tantalizingly close to formulating theories we would recognize today. My position is that the authors experienced traumatic events in their personal lives that changed the way their brains functioned; the neurological changes, in turn, oriented their personalities so that the traumatic elements are exposed in their private and public writing, often without their knowledge but also acknowledged by them and explicitly described.
The Structure of This Study

To further the discussion of trauma in the Romantic era, I will examine traumatic events in the lives of five Romantic authors: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Godwin, Mary Shelley, and Charles and Mary Lamb. After presenting the parameters of the trauma and the biographical evidence that supports the trauma, I will show how this personal trauma was transformed/translated/transmitted through their creative output. Chapter one discusses Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s unsuccessful grieving process after the loss of his father and brother, followed by his difficult years at Christ’s Hospital—which I read as an experience of traumatic captivity based on the parameters of Judith Herman. These early experiences are evident in Coleridge’s letters and notebooks and resonate strongly in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. The second chapter focuses on William Godwin and his experience as a young man when he was studying with the Reverend Samuel Newton. This experience was extremely traumatic for Godwin as is evident in his autobiographical fragments. I believe this experience created a dissociated individual that when combined with Godwin’s own personality, which fits within the parameters of today is called Narcissistic Personality Disorder, is the foundation for the troubling distance evident in his Memoirs of The Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Chapter three addresses the many traumatic interpersonal relationships Mary Shelley experienced with her father, her spouse, and her sisters. I then trace how those interpersonal relationships informed her complicated views of victimizers and victims as revealed in the characters she created in Frankenstein. Chapter four discusses some of my favorite personalities, Charles and Mary Lamb. In this chapter, I will return to the
importance of empathy and how the Lambs’ empathy allowed them to overcome their own traumas; made them a lynch-pin in the Godwin, Coleridge, Shelley circle; and informed the writing of both *Mrs. Leicester’s School* and some of Elia’s essays. To conclude the study, I will discuss how we as readers and as critics can use these theories to better inform our reading of works with and without including the biography of the author. I hope that the investigation into the personal traumas of these writers and how that trauma is transmitted into their works gives readers a more empathetic understanding of Romantic literature in particular and also that it will encourage empathetic readings of other works in other time periods.
Chapter One

Coleridge’s Overarching Childhood Trauma: Loss, Captivity, and the Nightmares They Produced

Samuel Taylor Coleridge still appears larger than life to many scholars of the Romantic era. He was a poet, a philosopher, a scientist, an early psychological enquirer, and, from all accounts, a mesmerizing public speaker and private conversationalist. Unfortunately, his personal life was chaotic: a failed marriage, serious disagreements with friends—some of which were never mended—and later in life accusations of plagiarism. Additionally, problems like his addiction to opium and his dramatic mood swings have led some modern psychologists and psychiatrists in the last twenty years—Kaye Jamison Redfield and Stephen M. Weissman in particular—to the conclusion that Coleridge may have suffered from Bipolar Disorder. Because as John Beer notes: “The existence of a division of some kind within Coleridge’s personality is hard to deny” (251). However, all of Coleridge’s issues as an adult must stem from something, whether biological or biographical, and, strangely enough, it may be both. To paraphrase Wordsworth’s astute observation, the adult is the product of the child. In the case of Coleridge, the child’s experiences and personality were particularly important to the adult and the author he would become. Coleridge’s early life was filled with complicated sibling and parental relations, the death of his father, and a horrendous nine years at school—most of which were spent under a tyrannical and sadistic instructor. These formative events are the foundation of the Coleridge who delights, mesmerizes, and confuses readers to this day, but the events take some decoding as the adult Coleridge, for
the very same reasons mentioned above, is not a totally reliable witness—even when it comes to his own life experiences. Richard Holmes sums up the problem in the Preface to the first volume of his Coleridge biography when he says: “Coleridge, like many later nineteenth-century writers (Dickens, Hardy, Kipling) worked hard to reconstruct the truth of his early experiences and opinions, and this double vision, or duplicity, is an important theme” (xvi). This then forces one to ask why was it necessary to re-vision, or obscure, the “truth” of his early experiences? In order to answer the question, one must look at Coleridge’s life, his semi-autobiographical poems, his letters, and his notebooks.

While most biographers and critics believe Coleridge’s life and writing career are or should be defined in terms of his relationship with William Wordsworth, I believe that the real defining events in Coleridge’s life took place much earlier. As Paul Manguson notes:

By April 1798, the date of ‘The Nightingale,’ he had completed his most optimistic poems in the conversational mode. ‘Dejection’ and ‘To William Wordsworth’ follow in a few years during which he had ceased to make optimistic statements about his own ability to construct a self, to find in his past and present the necessary continuity, and to ground that self in a greater personal reality whose existence he never doubted. (38) Coleridge’s time with Wordsworth was actually a short interlude of positivity in his larger life-narrative of negativity. But why was Coleridge, an acknowledged genius from a very early age, so unable to form a strong sense of self? Why did he continually look to his friends, first Middleton, then Southey, and Wordsworth, to provide his sense of self and his identity?
Early Childhood Trauma Compounded

Although there can be no doubt, as Richard Matlak skillfully illustrated, that Coleridge’s interaction with Wordsworth was poetically fruitful, it cannot explain the many personal issues Coleridge experienced before and after their collaboration. In addition, many of Coleridge’s most confounding personality traits had already been developed before their meeting. I believe his life and the total sum of his writings actually should be defined by three major events that occurred during his childhood: the night that six-year-old “Sam” Coleridge, as his family called him, ran away from home and spent exposed to the weather in Ottery; the death of his father, John Coleridge, when Coleridge was eight (which cannot be separated from the loss of his brother Frank’s presence in his life), and the nine years that Coleridge spent at Christ’s Hospital in London—most of which were spent under the heavy hand of James Bowyer (sometimes spelled Boyer). Scholars regularly recognize the first event as a watershed moment in Coleridge’s life, but the loss of Frank at the same time Coleridge lost his father, and his Christ’s Hospital experience are rarely given the time and attention they deserve. However, to truly understand how and why those years affected Coleridge, one must look at the events in chronological order.

Weissman, in his psychobiography, argues that Coleridge’s life was organized around “a personal unconscious myth” and that “Coleridge’s was Abel and Cain” (xv). Weissman believes this myth was constructed on the night that six-year-old Coleridge ran away after fighting with his brother Frank. The two boys were often rivals, and on this
eventful day, that rivalry was triggered by a piece of cheese. Coleridge told Thomas Poole the story in October 1797:

I had asked my mother one evening to cut my cheese *entire*, so that I might toast it: this was no easy matter, it being a *crumbly* cheese—My mother however did it— /I went into the garden for some thing or other, and in the mean time my Brother Frank *minced* my cheese, ‘to disappoint the favorite.’ I returned, saw the exploit, and in an agony of passion flew at Frank—he pretended to have been seriously hurt by my blow, flung himself on the ground, and there lay with outstretched limbs— /I hung over him moaning and in a great fright—he leaped up, & with a horse-laugh gave me a severe blow in the face— /I seized a knife, and was running at him, when my Mother came in & took me by the arm— / I expected a flogging— & struggling from her ran away, to a hill at the bottom of which the Otter flows. (CL V. I, 352)ii

The young Sam bursts out of the house to hide from his parents’ anger, and possibly, as Weissman and Richard Holmes imply, to worry his parents into transferring their attention back to Sam as the injured party (vxiii, 16). Coleridge himself, as an adult, recalls thinking “with inward & gloomy satisfaction, how miserable my Mother must be!” (CL V. I, 353). Weissman imaginatively paints a suitably dramatic scene—one that will reoccur in the adult Coleridge’s poetic imagery: “Outside the youngster sleeps fitfully. It is a dramatically stormy night—terrifying, but majestic—as if a sign of God’s judgment. Well versed in the tales of the Bible, the boy already knows the story of Cain and Able. Like Cain, he has struck out murderously against his brother; he is now an
outlaw and a wanderer. For the rest of his life he will feel this mark of Cain” (xix). This is a well-constructed sentiment, and it is true that Coleridge did feel alienated and lonely for much of his life, but I am not sure that his life’s works support the theory. John Beer agrees, explaining:

Coleridge himself never gives any hint of having seen himself as a Cain-figure so far as his brother is concerned” and that “[i]f there was a self-identification here it was perhaps rather with the lost child that he had become during the night following the struggle with Frank. Any guilt he might have had concerning the fight itself seems to have been well buried.

(3)

Beer offers a different biblical character for Coleridge’s central myth: “it is hard to see how, as the youngest of his parents’ ten children and a dreamer, Coleridge could have avoided comparing himself with [Joseph] who had been persecuted by his brothers as the favourite of his father—or, indeed not found satisfaction in the outcome of the tale, when Joseph prospered far more than they” (4). Holmes, however, argues that Coleridge used two other biblical figures as his unconscious alter egos, Benjamin and the prodigal son, because the “question of ‘inferiority’ was to be a recurring anxiety of [young Coleridge], uncertain whether he was the Benjamin or the black sheep” (5). The prodigal son was probably a later identification as Coleridge’s adventures at Cambridge follow that story line more closely. Holmes notes that because young Coleridge was smaller than other boys his age, “he was kept on at dame-school until the age of six” and not allowed to join his brother and the other boys who were under his father’s tutelage (8). This forced
distinction may have helped underscore Coleridge’s “inferiority” in his childhood imagination.

Whether or not the fight with his brother and his time as a runaway played a part in the feeling of inferiority is, and will always be, a matter of debate. An undisputed fact is that Coleridge’s night under the stars created an indelible impression on him that was still vivid twenty years later. In his notebook, he writes on a 19 July 1803:

about 9 o’clock had unpleasant chilliness—heard a noise which I thought Derwent’s in sleep—listened anxiously, found it was a Calf bellowing—instantly came on my mind that night, I slept out at Ottery— & the Calf in the Field across the river whose lowing had so deeply impressed me—Chill + Child + Calf-lowning probably the rivers Greta and Otter. (CN1, 1416)

Holmes believes that the night under the stars, combined with the death of John Coleridge, helped Coleridge develop “the self-portrait of a precocious, highly imaginative child, driven into ‘exile’ in the world before he was emotionally prepared for its rigours, by the early death of his father. Cut off from the universe of nature and family affections, he saw himself as an exceptional creature, both intellectually brilliant and morally unstable” (1). Manguson argues that Coleridge’s “constant tendency to think of himself as an isolated soul and an outcast generated in him a fear of an imagination that could project only objects of fear” (17). The night appears again in Coleridge’s poem “Dejection: An Ode.” In the poem, however, it is a female child who is lost, and it is “A tale of less affright” and one that is “tempered with delight” only because it occurs in
Otway—a sign of Coleridge’s retelling of his youth (128). However, the introduction of the scene in the poem is completely overturned/negated by the terror of the child:

’Tis of a little child
Upon a lonesome wild,
Not far from home, but she hath lost her way:
And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,
And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear. (121-25)

The evening Coleridge attempted to stab his brother combined with his night in the storm and his desire that his mother would be worried probably helped define him, in his own mind, as morally unstable and as an outcast long before opium or his adult proclivities entered into his self-narration. Clearly, though, the events of the night itself were burned deeply into the psyche of the adult and would be illustrated in the tenor of some of his poems.

As traumatic as that night was, the events in October 1781 played a more important role in the adult Coleridge eventually became. In late September, John Coleridge escorted Frank to Plymouth so that he could become a junior midshipman under the eyes of Admiral Graves, who was a friend of the family. Holmes suggests that it may have been the “rivalry and battles between the two youngest brothers” that decided Frank’s fate (21). However, Weissman notes that at the ages of eleven and twelve were not uncommon ages to begin apprenticeships “by the child-rearing standards of the day (11). As John Coleridge was already sixty two, Holmes reminds readers that John “could not realistically expect to see the boy again” making this a stressful and emotional event for the older gentleman (21). In 1797, in an autobiographical letter to Thomas Poole,
Coleridge explained that his father had dreamed a prophetic dream the night before he left Plymouth to return home: “he had never been superstitious—but that the night before he had had a dream which had made a deep impression. He dreamt that Death had appeared to him, as he is commonly painted, & touched him with his Dart” (CL V. I, 353). John Coleridge was greeted by all of his family upon his return—except young Sam who was fast asleep. After reassuring the family that Frank was under the command of “a religious Captain,” he retired to bed “in high spirits” (355). Later that night Coleridge was awakened by his mother’s “shriek;” he remembers saying “Papa is dead!” (355). He did not consciously know that his father had returned to the house, but he writes: “How I came to think of his Death [that night], I cannot tell; but so it was. — Dead he was” (355). In a short period of time, Coleridge had lost both his brother Frank, who he never saw again, and his father. It is important to note that Coleridge’s father died before Coleridge could welcome him back from his trip. Therefore, Coleridge was missing closure with his father. He had to depend upon his mother and his sister for their account of his father’s dream and his “high health & good spirits” (355). If the child felt any resentment towards his father (or Frank) for leaving or any jealousy for Frank’s impending adventures on the sea, those feelings also would have been unresolved.

Coleridge would have to process the sudden death of his father along with the absence of Frank—who, despite their differences, was the brother to whom Coleridge was closest. In addition, the entire household was forced to move because their home was tied to John Coleridge’s position. It also appears to be during this time period that Coleridge’s relationship with his mother became strained. The cumulative effect of the losses that the eight-year-old Coleridge sustained in a matter of weeks cannot be
underestimated nor can the role they played in the creation of the adult. There are several theories of loss in childhood and the role the loss plays in adult creativity. Weissman offers his theory in the introduction to his psychobibliography:

Stated simply, the Loss-Resititution Hypothesis views the artist as a loss-sensitive, separation prone individual both by inborn temperament and as the reaction to early developmental experiences of loss and separation. As a result of these twin factors, he learns as a child to rely upon his ability to create imagery (verbal, musical, visual, etc.) as a compensatory defense against losses and separations. Later as an adult, the artist is a depression-prone, loss-sensitive individual who relies upon his capacity to create both as a coping mechanism and nondefensively, as a mode of identity formation. (xv)

Weissman continues that when viewed from this perspective, “art is a disguised form of nostalgically autobiographical remembering whose commemorative powers attempt to defy nature’s inevitable forces of death, decay, and loss by creating a work of permanence that can outlive its creator” (xv). He firmly believes that “creative activity defends against depression while the creative product itself (play, poem, painting, or what have you) is the symbolic denial of loss” (xv). However, I believe Wiessman’s theory is a bit reductive even if it does appear to explain Coleridge’s creativity and a good portion of his temperament.

Weissman’s theory does not explain Coleridge’s continual questioning of his self-identity as is evident in “The Pains of Sleep.” This poem was written after a walking tour through Scotland with William and Dorothy Wordsworth. As Manguson points out, this
was “the only poem written that year,” and it contains a “strange mixture of innocence and guilt” (66, 71). In the final stanza, Coleridge—who has gone three nights without sleep—writes that he is “O’ercome with sufferings strange and wild” that cause him to weep “as I had been a child” (39-40). The tears apparently ease his anguish, as he says in the text, but the next lines do not bear this out:

Such punishments, I said were due
To natures deepest stained with sin, —
For aye entempesting anew
The unfathomable hell within
The horror of their deeds to view,
To know and loathe, yet wish and do!
Such griefs with such men well agree,
But wherefore, wherefore fall on me? (44-50)

In asking why he is tormented, Coleridge answers his own question—he has a nature deeply stained with sin. At the same time, he cannot believe that of himself. This shows his self-identity is extremely unstable as well as the immense burden of guilt he continually carried within him.

In my opinion, Delmont Morrison and Shirley Linden Morrison give a better explanation of childhood loss, unsuccessful grieving, and the effect these play in adult creativity, identity formation, and personal relationships in their book *Memories of Loss and Dreams of Perfection*. In their study, the Morrisons thoroughly explain the process of childhood grief using modern case studies and then examine four authors to explore their concepts: Emily Brontë, J. M. Barrie, Isak Dinesen, and Jack Kerouac. However,
their findings can also easily be applied to Coleridge. According to the Morrisons, Coleridge’s loss came at a particularly difficult time in childhood because “[b]etween the ages of approximately two and eight, while the child is discovering the boundaries and limitations of self, imagination functions to synthesize various aspects of the child’s experience” (5). This, however, actually explains Coleridge’s immediate mythmaking about his father and his time at Ottery and his continual attempts to conceal his past, about which most biographers complain. The Morrisons explain that mythmaking is a normal response to childhood grief:

one of the significant components of unsuccessful grieving is that the negative affects toward the deceased that existed prior to the death often do not find expression in memory and are never completely integrated into the child’s understanding of the meaning of the loss. In this situation, a more complete understanding of the meaning of the death and loss of the deceased is never accomplished. It is the child who has ambivalent conflicted feelings towards the deceased who is at risk for unsuccessful grieving and mourning. (3)

The particular circumstances in which Coleridge lost his father (and we must remember his brother for all intents and purposes) probably caused some ambivalent feelings towards his parents—both father and mother. However, because his father died, Coleridge would have suppressed the negative feelings. In fact, Gillman quotes Coleridge as saying: “The image of my father, my revered, kind, learned, simple-hearted father is a religion to me!” (11). In view of the Morrisons’ theory, this is a normal reaction to an unsuccessful childhood grieving process.
While Holmes appears to believe that Coleridge enjoyed the mythmaking process, the Morisons argue that it is an integral part of unsuccessful grieving: “The important element in grieving and mourning is that there has been a relationship with a person that is valued, and death results in the irreversible termination of that relationship. The child feels deprived by the loss. When the lost person has been the object of mostly positive feelings, the grieving process involves the profound experience of losing a loved individual” (Morrison 5). They believe that children construct fantasies/myths about the deceased in order to understand and master [feeling] that is accompanied by prevailing themes of guilt and depression. All of the fantasies, however, result in unsatisfactory conclusions, because the images and themes in play generate anxiety rather than reduce it. If these conflicts are not resolved over time the child moves into an adolescence and adulthood where a memory is constructed to provide some cohesion to what is experienced as a fragmented history. (14)

Coleridge, therefore, probably began constructing these myths/fantasies around the time of his father’s death, Frank’s absence, and the move to a new home. Children who are not successful in the grieving process may begin to use their imaginations habitually for “for self-protection and compensation structures the memory of the past event, and [then] a personal myth is created” (15-16). The Morisons explain:

Poorly understood, powerful, enduring memories begin to be constructed. Because of anxiety, these thoughts cannot be expressed and explored consciously in the full emotional range of relationships. Memories of
these first loves find expression in ways that reduce anxiety and guilt through enduring fantasies protective of self. At the same time, these fantasies limit the capacity to understand and experience love through reciprocity. (24-25)

Children who can complete the grieving process successfully only need the fantasies for the period of time it takes them to work through the grief; however, children who are unsuccessful in the grieving process become enmeshed in the fantasies. These children then establish a pattern where the “meaning of a child’s experience is structured by knowing a new event or person in terms of properties that belong to something else or someone else experienced in the past. The child perceives a shared attribute by comparing the new event with a memory,” creating a metaphor (Morrison 17). James Gillman, who cared for Coleridge in his final years, recalls Coleridge telling stories about his father. Gillman says that Coleridge would “repeat them till the tears ran down his face, from the fond recollection of his beloved parent” (2). Gillman explains that the story session ended “with an affectionate sigh, and the observation, ‘Yes my friend, he was indeed an Israelite without guile, and might be compared to Parson Adams’” (2). This is evidence of the metaphors Coleridge formed out of his memories of his father. Importantly, the Morrisons explain that the “[m]etaphors formed in childhood to represent emotional events experienced during that time endure, and when explored by the imagination of a poet produce the shared emotional experience that is art” (18). They believe that “[t]his effort to establish the metaphorical ‘truth’ of early experience can occur over an extended period of time during which the artist constructs new metaphors to represent original meanings” (18). This means that, in order to emotionally process
new events, Coleridge, as an adult, would still be dependent on metaphors, but because of his immense creativity, he can construct new metaphors as needed. This dependence on the comparison of current emotional events to the loss in the past becomes emotionally crippling for the adult and explains many of Coleridge’s confusing reactions to events in his adult life.

Even as a child, Coleridge appeared to be a difficult individual to understand. Wiessman describes Coleridge as “[d]esperately insecure but arrogantly confident, dreamily mild-mannered and stormily temperamental, young Sam was filled with glaring contradictions which suggest that he was either born with or soon developed quicksilver mood swings” (8). This is the foundation of Wiessman’s diagnosis of what is currently called Bipolar Disorder. In contrast, Holmes believes that Coleridge’s identity was established early and cemented by age six as a result of the night he spent by the river: “Coleridge also saw himself as little Sam, becoming almost comically peculiar and precocious” (11). The night Coleridge ran away, Holmes believes, signified to Coleridge “the idea of being the abandoned and outcast child” as evidenced by “the number of times he referred to it in later life” (18, 17). However, I believe the idea of abandonment may also have been a result of Coleridge’s early losses. There is a very good chance that the events, which happened over a period of three short years, were combined in his memory and controlled by the same methods he developed to cope with his unsuccessful grief.

The Morrisons’ theory also helps explain how Coleridge’s relationship with his mother deteriorated during this period. For a child like Coleridge,
the immediate results of unsuccessful grieving and mourning are anxiety and depressing preoccupations regarding the lost individual that reflect the intense yet unintegrated feelings of both affection and dislike that existed before death. The existing fantasies that accompany either the feelings of affection or dislike may be incongruous with the child’s perception of the reactions of psychologically important members of the family. This internal and interpersonal tension can result in a significant compromise in the child’s cognitive and emotional development. (Morrison 3)

It is likely that, in the emotional aftermath of losing Frank and his father, Coleridge misunderstood his mother’s grieving process. To children facing loss, like Coleridge, “the two most consistent factors contributing to the child’s cognitive and emotional reaction are the family support available and the levels of stress and trauma involved with the event” (Morrison 46).

Ann Coleridge found herself widowed and homeless at the age of fifty-three with two of her ten children still dependent upon her, and these stressors would have been compounded by her own grief and mourning process. As a young child, Coleridge still would have been egocentric enough to expect his mother to care for him first. However, Ann Coleridge may not have had enough emotional energy left from her own struggles to mitigate her son’s grief. As the Morrisons explain, any change in the usual way of responding to the child “reinforces the feeling that the parent is no longer a consistent source of control and protection” (47). In addition, like many children who experience loss, Coleridge was becoming more difficult to deal with. He was allowed to continue at his father’s school under the new schoolmaster, but “returned home with daily tales of the
new master’s mistakes and criticisms of his teaching talents” (Weissman 12). Coleridge
would later tell Poole that his father’s replacement, Parson Warren, “was a Booby” and
that “every detraction from his merits seemed an oblation to the memory of my Father”
(CLV. I, 388). There is a very real possibility that Coleridge became an enormous mental
and emotional burden on his mother. If, in her own preoccupation with grief and the
stress of supporting herself and her children, she lashed out at Coleridge in the same way
Ann did in later life as recounted by Southey—it would have an immense effect on
Coleridge’s emerging sense of self. Coleridge’s last lines in “The Pains of Sleep” are
“To be beloved is all I need, / And whom I love, I love indeed”—a cry from the soul of a
wounded child (51-52). As the Morisons point out, a “child’s first images of love and
competition for this love involve evaluations of self that are influenced by the evaluation
of those he or she loves” (24). In addition, “this developing social awareness generates
negative connotations of self that are also the sources of anxiety. The source of anxiety is
a function of the egocentric perception of internal and external events” (Morrison 24). In
other words, his mother’s negative reactions towards Coleridge in his egocentric state of
grief, would translate to the child as a negative reaction to him as a person, that he was
unworthy of her love—an outcast. At the age of eight, he would not understand that there
were mitigating circumstances that might have affected his mother’s reactions or
statements. As a grieving child, Coleridge would need positive interpersonal interactions
with his mother and the other adults surrounding him to help reduce the guilt and the
anxiety that he was feeling over the death of his father and the loss of Frank—and
possibly even the loss of his childhood home, which would have held some positive
associations and was the last link to memories of his father and Frank. Indeed, Holmes
believes that Coleridge “clearly felt he became at first an anxiety, and then a
disappointment to [his mother]”, which in turn “led to the feeling very early on, that in
her eyes by comparison with his brothers, he was already a failure by the time he left
Ottery” at the age of nine (9). The Morrisons believe that the fantasies children create
cannot mitigate the anxiety and guilt without simultaneous positive interaction with the
remaining parent (25). In addition, this positive interpersonal interaction would increase
the child’s “awareness of self and others” (25). Ironically as personally destructive as
this guilt and anxiety was to prove for Coleridge’s inner narrative of self and worthiness,
the reliance on fantasy to help cope with emotional situations was probably imperative to
the development of Coleridge’s poetic and philosophic mind. As David Vallins notes,
“much of Coleridge’s writing suggests that his interest in sustaining this conviction [of
the inexpressible] arose from a need to escape from negative states of emotion by
replacing them with the pleasurable feelings to be derived from creative and intellectual
activity” (24).

At this point, the loss of Frank’s active presence in Coleridge’s life must be
addressed. In order to do so, the timeline must briefly shift twelve years into the future.
Wiessman, Beer, and Holmes all find Coleridge’s reaction, or really the lack of reaction,
to Frank’s suicide in 1793 surprising. Coleridge really only makes a small mention of
Frank’s death in a letter to his older brother George:

—Poor Francis! I have shed the tear of natural affection over him. —He
was the only one of my Family, whom similarity of Ages made more
peculiarly my Brother—he was the hero of all the little tales, that make the
remembrance of my earliest days interesting! —Yet his Death filled me
rather with Melancholy than Anguish. —I quitted Ottery, when I was so young, that most of those endearing circumstances, that are wont to render the scenes and companions of our childhood delightful in the recollection, I have associated with the place of my education— (CL V. I, 53)

Notice that, in the mythmaking fantasies of Coleridge’s childhood, he has transformed Frank from a rival into “the hero of all the little tales,” essentially forgetting their rivalry. Wiessman believes that Coleridge had a “habitual tendency to delay his emotional reactions;” therefore, he “seemed barely to register the news of his brother’s suicide. The death seemed to him like a remote event that had happened to a stranger he had known in another life” (38). Weissman describes Coleridge’s reaction in the following manner: “Frank was dead and gone—a stranger from another life. Coleridge had forgotten how much he had loved his brother, how passionately he had hated him, and how deeply involved with one another they had been. He had been unable to grieve for his dead brother” (45). I believe, however, that he is misreading Coleridge by expecting him to act as if the loss was new and fresh. What if the reason Coleridge is not more actively mourning Frank’s death is because he had already mourned Frank’s loss alongside the loss of his father, albeit unsuccessfully? Even though the process did not complete successfully in his psyche, meaning that he was able to place the even in perspective and move forward emotionally, Coleridge would feel as if he had already gone through his mourning for Frank. Coleridge and Frank were not known to have direct contact after Frank left for Plymouth. There are extant letters from Frank to their sister Nancy, but none addressed directly to Coleridge. It actually would be more surprising if there were letters, as Coleridge would not have had the money to pay for the postage required to
receive them. At this point in England, the postage was paid by the recipient so all letters would have gone to one of the older brothers or their mother (LCML V. I, 6 n.9). To Coleridge, Frank ceased to exist in 1781 as an active part of his life and his family. In addition, I believe that any thoughts of Frank would have become entwined with the fantasies of Coleridge’s father and their lives before his death. Frank, as an adult, did not exist in Coleridge’s daily reality. Therefore, it should not surprise biographers that Coleridge did not exhibit more overt grief when he learned of Frank’s death.

Considering the mitigating circumstances of Coleridge’s own problems at that time of his life, losing the Craven scholarship competition and his mounting debts, there is even less chance of Coleridge being able to process Frank’s death. He was too caught up in his own dilemma.

Coleridge, as a twenty-year-old college student, was hampered by the lack of emotional development as a result of his unsuccessful grieving so any processing he managed would occur in a manner that more resembled the eight-year-old child than an adult. This is because his cognitive-affect had already been so seriously disrupted; therefore, his capacity for understanding other individuals would be severely limited (Morrison 61). The Morrisons explain the repercussions as follows:

A major characteristic of these [adults] is their difficulties in experiencing their own inner emotional states in the context of a self that is often not well defined. They may have relationships in which they have feelings of profound emptiness during a separation from the loved individual and an experience of a sense of oneness or merger in their presence. They are at times acutely aware of their thoughts and feelings, yet at other times they
can be overwhelmed with their affect. While their perception and sensitivity in relations is sometimes impressive, a corresponding self-centered preoccupation expressed in idiosyncratic thoughts and fantasies is not uncommon. Their capacity to tolerate personal contact is limited, and frequently they are socially withdrawn. The problem in the integration of the self is reflected in a tendency to split their own personality into good and bad parts. Under stress they sometimes experience their own affects as due to an external source and may perceive others as the cause of both their positive and their negative feelings about themselves. (61)

To make his life even more difficult, Coleridge also would compare his relationships with those around him to the “idealized memory of the lost family member that served as a figure for projective identification” (Morrison 63). This explains Coleridge’s many unsuccessful relationships as an adult and also the curiously formal tone of his letter to George about Frank’s death. This also explains what Douglas Angus diagnosed in 1960 as “symptoms of that psychoneurotic pattern known as narcissism; that is, he had an abnormal need for love and sympathy (Angus 655-56). Narcissistic Personality Disorder, as it is defined today, is actually more involved and will be discussed in detail in the next chapter for now it suffices to say that Coleridge showed too much self doubt to fit this type of personality disorder. He was psychologically still a child; therefore, he acted as a child would when involved in relationships, whether they were friendships or love affairs.

Like his relationship with Frank, Coleridge’s relationship with his mother would never again recover after his father’s death in 1781. The possible feelings of worthlessness and alienation were most likely compounded when Anne Coleridge
worked with Coleridge’s godfather to have the boy placed in Christ’s Hospital as a ward of the school within a few months of his father’s death. Rather than taking fond memories of his mother to the school with him, “Coleridge came to idealise the brother-sister relationship,” but Holmes believes that “in these reminiscences there is an exaggerated idealising quality, that suggests the perfection of Nancy was really a disguised form of reproach to his real mother” (sic, 15). Coleridge is not the only sibling to exhibit ambivalence about his mother. Holmes notes that Coleridge’s older brother “John, [who was stationed] out in India, would also make a cult of his sister [Nancy], whom he had never seen, while Frank in turn idealised his old nurse,” which suggests to Holmes that it is possible “that they all felt certain reservations about their mother” (15). John sent his mother £200 to encourage her not to send “young Sam” to the school nor to apprentice Nancy as a shop clerk, which as Holmes emphasizes was an enormous amount of money for a soldier and which underscores John’s concern about their mother’s plan (22). That someone else in the family was concerned about the way Ann Coleridge was divesting herself of her children lends credence to Coleridge’s statement: “but for my Mother’s pride & spirit of aggrandizing her family,” his father would have allowed all of “his children to be Blacksmiths &c” (CL V. I, 345). This statement has typically been interpreted as Coleridge’s demonization of his mother in order to support the mythmaking idea that his father had “little parental ambition in him,” but John’s actions show that there may be some truth in the accusation (354). Ann Coleridge even sent her youngest child to London nearly six months early to stay with her brother rather than have young Coleridge spend the extra time at home. Holmes states, “[t]he impression that she was glad to have him off her hands is increased by the remarkable fact that he
was not allowed back to Ottery, during the brief Christmas and summer vacations, more
than three or possibly four times over the next nine years” (24). In addition, the contract
that Ann Coleridge willingly signed for Christ’s Hospital gave the school the right to
assign Coleridge out as an apprentice in London if he was not found suitable as a
university prospect. In modern terms, Ann Coleridge gave the school complete custody
of her youngest son. The clause does not appear to be a requirement for entrance since
Charles Lamb’s application, which was accepted the same year, does not have this clause
attached (Johnson 74, 5).

Coleridge’s troubled relationship with his mother was never resolved, and there
are several interesting entries in his notebooks that appear to relate to their relationship.
In a 1796 notebook entry, Coleridge writes “The poor & the rich in this resemble each
other—they are usually unloving of their children—n.b. explain why” (CN1, 78).
Kathleen Coburn’s note for the entry attributes the reference to William Paley’s 1793
pamphlet, Reasons for Contentment; Addressed to the Labouring Part of the British
Public, but comments, “Coleridge’s note has of course very great personal psychological
interest, even in the impersonal form of the statement” (n. CN1, 78). This notation
underscores how unloved Coleridge felt as a child and that he still feels that way fifteen
years after leaving home. Weissman notes that the relationship was so bad that Coleridge
did not even visit his mother on her deathbed, “although there was ample time for him to
do so” (13). A notebook entry that is roughly concurrent to his mother’s death is another
sad comment on their relationship. Coleridge copies a quotation that reads:

In the comment of R. Akibah on Ecclesiastes, XII.1 we have a story of a
mother who having nothing else to blame her Child for, or—it being some
way deformed, & unwilling that it should be deemed to have been
punished for some fault of hers, complained of her Child, in earnest before
the Judge […] that it kicked her unmercifully in the Womb. Lightfoot
Vol. 2. P. 569” (CN3, 3618).

Coburn attributes this to Coleridge’s reading of Paraclesus, but it is interesting that
Coleridge would choose to transcribe this story at this time in his life (n. CN3, 3618). It
again emphasizes that he felt pushed away by his mother and rejected, perhaps out of a
concern that people would find fault with her because of Coleridge’s unusual personality.
It is hard to imagine that Coleridge felt anything other than rejected when his mother sent
him away as a child. Coleridge, now nine years old, was once again being wrenched
from everything and everyone familiar to him. In addition, he was being sent into a
situation that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

The Effect of Christ’s Hospital

It is surprising how little critics and biographers comment on Coleridge’s time at
Christ’s Hospital given its life-long effect on his life. When one surveys the indexes of
Coleridge scholarship, including his notebooks and letters, there are very few notations
for Christ’s Hospital or its headmaster, James Bowyer. Part of the reason for this
deficiency is that Coleridge’s public writings say very little about the school, and then it
is mostly positive, as it was in the letter that Coleridge wrote to his brother George upon
hearing of Frank’s death. This and the friendships that Coleridge forged at the school
also lead biographers and scholars to consider the experience, overall, as a positive one. However, Coleridge’s notebooks and some of his letters tell a very different story. In the spring of 1802, Coleridge wrote: “N.B. The great importance of breeding up children happy to at least 15 or 16 illustrated in my always dreaming of Christ Hospital and when not quite well having all those uneasy feeling which I had at School/feelings of Easter Monday &c” (CN 1, 1176). This entry underscores that his early years at the school were anything but happy. However, because Coleridge is not always a reliable witness when it comes to his early years, most biographers depend on Charles Lamb’s essay “Christ’s Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago” for a picture of Coleridge at the school. To add to the confusion, Lamb wrote the semi-autobiographical essay in his Elia persona. The only Christ’s Hospital essay Lamb wrote in his own voice, “On Christ’s Hospital, and the Character of the Christ’s Hospital Boys,” which will be discussed in chapter four, is nearly as complementary and glowing as the description Coleridge gives in *Biographia Literaria*. However grateful Coleridge was for the education, opportunities, and friendships that the school provided, he was never able to rid himself of the horrific images the school or the trauma of his experiences at the school that haunted his dreams. The evidence of this trauma is found in his many notebook entries discussing his nightmares and night terrors. First, one must take a closer look at Christ’s Hospital, as it existed in Coleridge’s time, and ascertain why the experience was so psychologically scarring.

Based on the prior discussion and the work of Wiessman and Holmes, one may safely assume Coleridge was still grieving the loss of his father (and his brother) when he was relocated to London in 1782. Weissman believes: “Coleridge’s first two years at
Christ’s Hospital, from the ages of nine to eleven, were the most gruesome period of his childhood. He was suffering from profound melancholia after his father’s death, and this was aggravated both by the stress of being sent away from home and by the grim authoritarian atmosphere of Christ’s Hospital” (19). After a few heady months following his uncle, John Bowden, around the taverns and participating in the lively, and often drunken, debates with other tavern patrons, Coleridge was officially brought to Christ’s Hospital to begin his education in the fall of 1782. Following the ten weeks with Bowden and his beleaguered daughter, Coleridge was sent to the preparatory school for Christ’s Hospital in Hertford. Coleridge arrived at the prep school “most completely spoilt & pampered, both mind and body” (CL1, 388). While the child could see, and could incorporate into his mythmaking and self-narrative, the time with his uncle as a type of vacation from the problems he left at Ottery and the six weeks he spent at Hertford as a joyous time when he “had plenty to eat & drink & pudding & vegetables almost every day,” the new school was a stark reminder that his life had forever changed. Coleridge mines these memories in “Frost at Midnight” when he writes of his dreams of Ottery—his “sweet birth-place,” and how when the door to the classroom opened, his “heart leaped up” in hopes of seeing a family member’s face—“Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved” (40-42). Note that even in his nostalgic retelling of his first days at school, Coleridge does not mention his mother or his brothers.

Once Coleridge was admitted to the main campus of Christ’s Hospital, he lost what little identity he had, as youngest son and adored nephew, and became just one of 700 boys. Holmes describes the school as “a highly conservative institution, largely funded by philanthropists from the City of London, with spartan facilities and food,
lengthy church attendances, and strictly practical aims for most of its pupils” and explains that unlike Eaton, Harrow, and Westminster—the aristocratic public schools—Christ’s Hospital had “no riots, no underground magazines, no tutorial friendships between boys and masters, no freedoms outside of school hours” (26). Lamb, writing as Elia in the essay “Christ’s Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago,” described the harsh punishments for boys who attempted to run away from the school. The first offence was punished by confinement in “fetters” (Elia 34). The second time a student attempted to escape, he was confined in “the dungeons” (34). Lamb describes the punishment in the dungeons at length:

These were little, square, Bedlam cells, where a boy could just lie at his length upon straw and a blanket—a mattress, I think, was afterwards substituted—with a peep of light, let in askance, from a prison-orifice at top, barely enough to read by. Here the poor boy was locked in by himself all day, without sight of any but the porter who brought him his bread and water—who might not speak to him; — or of the beadle, who came twice a week to call him out to receive his periodical chastisement, which was almost welcome, because it separated him for a brief interval from solitude; — and here he was shut up by himself of nights out of the reach of any sound, to suffer whatever horror the weak nerves and superstition incident to his time of live might subject him to. (34-35)

Lamb, who suffered from extreme night terrors as a child, claims—in the voice of Elia—that some children were so affected by this punishment that “[o]ne or two instances of lunacy, or attempted suicide” resulted, after which the governors of the school relented
and did not force the children to remain locked up at night (35). As severe as Lamb found this punishment, a child who attempted to run away for the third time was expelled from the school, but not until the beadle—“clad in his state robe” and two governors—who were “of direr import” because they were never visible except “in these extremities”—made an example of the boy before the entire student population (36). First the child was stripped of his school uniform in a formal de-frocking ceremony witnessed by the students and the school governors (35). Lamb claims that the governors were not in attendance to mitigate the beatings, but rather to enforce their severity to “the uttermost stripe” (36). Once the child was dressed in “a jacket resembling those which London lamplighters formerly delighted in,” he was physically punished (35). Lamb describes the beating that followed:

   The scourging was, after the old Roman fashion, long and stately. The lector accompanied the criminal quite around the hall. We [as student observers] were generally too faint with attending to the previous disgusting circumstance to make accurate report with our eyes of the degree of corporal suffering inflicted. Report, of course, gave out the back knotty and livid. After scourging, he was made over, in his San Benito, to his friend if he had any (but commonly such poor runagates were friendless), or to his parish officer, who, to enhance the effect of the scene, had his station allotted to him on the outside of the hall gate. (36)

This formal ceremony would have forced the children to understand that they were not in the school voluntarily, they were not free to decide whether or not to continue. The boys
actually belonged to the school, by virtue of the contracts their parents signed, until they were released for apprenticeship or to attend university.

As one of the youngest and newest boys at the school, Coleridge was at the mercy of the older students for, as he states to Poole, “[t]he boys were, when I was admitted, under excessive subordination to each other according to rank in school” (CL V. I, 389). Elia is more descriptive of the results of this subordination:

The oppressions of these young brutes are heart-sickening to call to recollection. I have been called out of my bed, and waked for the purpose, in the coldest winter nights – and this not once, but night after night—in my shirt, to receive the discipline of a leathern thong, with eleven other sufferers, because it pleased my callow overseer, when there has been any talking after we were gone to bed, to make the six last beds in the dormitory, where the youngest children of us slept, answerable for an offence they neither dared to commit, nor had the power to hinder. -- The same execrable tyranny drove the younger part of us from the fires, when our feet were perishing with snow; and, under the cruelest penalties, forbade the indulgence of a drink of water, when we lay in sleepless summer nights, fevered with the season, and the day's sports. (Elia 30-31)

As Elia, Lamb even recounts the story of a “petty Nero” who branded a younger boy “with a redhot iron” (31). This excessive tyranny and abuse is also recounted in Leigh Hunt’s memoirs of his days at Christ’s Hospital: “There was a monitor or “big boy” in office, who had a trick of entertaining himself by pelting lesser boys’ heads with a hard ball. He used to throw it at this boy and that; make the throwee bring it back to him; and
then send a rap with it on his cerebellum as he was going off” (92). Hunt also recalls his own abuse by an older boy for whom he had refused to do something: “he showed me a knot in a long handkerchief and told me I should receive a lesson from that handkerchief every day, with the addition of a fresh knot every time, unless I chose to alter my mind. I did not choose. I received the daily or rather nightly lesson, for it was then most convenient to strip me” (94). Clearly, the younger boys were at the mercy of the older ones. If Hunt first felt that the fighting of the boys “frightened [him] as something devlish,” how would Coleridge have felt in the sudden reversal of his fortunes (89)?

In addition to the sudden status change, Coleridge and the other boys were nearly starved. Coleridge tells Poole in his understated/concealing manner: “Our diet was very scanty—Every morning a bit of dry bread & some bad small beer—every evening a larger piece of bread & cheese or butter which ever we liked” (CL V. I, 389). That Coleridge, Hunt, and Lamb can recall the exact diet of their school years in detail, to include the day-by-day menus, tells how strongly the deprivation was burned into their memories. Coleridge says that their food was “portioned— & excepting on Wednesday I never had a belly full. Our appetites were damped never satisfied—and we had no vegetables” (389). Hunt is more explicit, beginning by saying “we were not too well fed at that time, either with quantity or quality” (105). Hunt then describes the same small breakfast as Coleridge does, but he elaborates:

This was not much for growing boys, who had had nothing to eat from six or seven o’clock the preceding evening. For dinner we had the same [small] quantity of bread, with meat only every other day, and that consisting of a small slice, such as would be given to an infant three or
four years old. Yet even that, with all our hunger, we very often left half-eaten; the meat was so tough. On the other days, we had a milk-porridge, ludicrously thin; or rice-milk, which was better. (105-6).

Like Coleridge, Hunt mournfully recalls “[t]here were no vegetables or puddings” and that “[f]or supper, we had a like piece of bread, with butter or cheese; and then to bed, ‘with what appetite we might’” (106). Of course, as Elia, Lamb has more leeway to give explicit descriptions of the food from which the boys were expected to gain sustenance. Lamb/Elia saves much of his scorn for the nurses, who “used to carry away openly, in open platters, for their own tables, one out of two of every hot joint, which the careful matron had been seeing scrupulously weighed out for our dinners” and thus further depriving the starving boys (32). He also complains that the portraits meant to inspire the boys had little effect: “the sight of sleek well-fed blue-coat boys in pictures was, at that time, I believe, little consolatory to him, or us, the living ones, who saw the better part of our provisions carried away before our faces by harpies; and ourselves reduced (with the Trojan in the hall of Dido) ‘To feed our mind with idle portraiture’” (32). Even writing under his own name, Lamb explained the portions of food the boys received “the whole of which, while he was in health, was little more than sufficient to allay his hunger” (Works V. I, 142). The poor diet combined with the stress of his new surroundings would certainly have depressed a boy much more mentally stable than Coleridge was at that point in his life.

However, for better or, more likely, for worse, the most memorable part of Christ’s Hospital was the headmaster, James Bowyer. Coleridge came under the supervision of Bowyer during his third year at the school. Thomas Middleman, an older
student, is said to have found Coleridge reading Virgil for pleasure and recommended the young man for Bowyer’s tutelage. Hunt provides a physical description of Bowyer in his autobiography, saying Bowyer

was a short stout man, inclining to punchiness, with large face and hands, an aquiline nose, long upper lip, and a sharp mouth. His eye was close and cruel. The spectacles which he wore threw a balm over it. Being a clergyman, he dressed in black, with a powdered wig. His clothes were cut short; his hands hung out of the sleeves, with tight wristbands, as if ready for execution; and as he generally wore grey worsted stockings, very tight, with a little balustrade leg, his whole appearance presented something formidable succinct, hard, and mechanical. (sic, Hunt 116)

Note that Hunt’s description of Bowyer shows notes of criminality in his appearance, especially in his illfitting clothing making him appear “ready for execution.” One must also wonder if Hunt intentionally wrote “punchiness” instead of “paunchiness” in view of Bowyer’s violent behavior. In contrast, biographers have very little to say about Bowyer, and many of them place Bowyer’s proclivity for beating the students within the range of “normal” for his time in history. Weissman believes Bowyer to be: “[a] curmudgeonly man but a dedicated teacher who took an intense interest in his boys;” Wiessman’s only comment on Bowyer’s cruelty is that he “was a stern taskmaster who liberally wielded his flogging birch to reward shoddy scholarship” (21). Holmes is more realistic about Bowyer’s cruelty, stating: “All discipline was enforced by Bowyer with savage and frequent flogging” (26-27). Holmes does note, that “it is one of the many peculiarities of the Biographia that [Coleridge] afterwards pretended that Bowyer was a paragon of
pedagogical justice” because “[t]his is contradicted by all other records of Christ’s Hospital, even that of its official historian, who implicitly admitted that Bowyer was a sadist” (30). He is the only biographer to explicitly paint Bowyer as sadistic; however, even Holmes believes that the severity of the school was one of the reasons for the success of its pupils.

As with his comments on the Christ’s Hospital as a whole, Coleridge’s public remarks about Bowyer are generally positive with just enough hints of terror to allow readers to peek below the surface if they so desire. In the midst of Coleridge’s glowing remarks about Bowyer as a instructor, he comments: “The reader will, I trust, excuse this tribute of a recollection to a man, whose severities, even now, not seldom furnish the dreams, by which the blind fancy would fain interpret to the mind the painful sensations of distempered sleep” (Biographia 161). Even in the middle of his appreciative passage, Coleridge must acknowledge that Bowyer’s memory still has the power to generate his most frightening nightmares. Lamb, as Elia, and Hunt both make extensive notations of Bowyer’s cruelty. Lamb calls the contrast in the school between Matthew Field’s half and Bowyer’s half “as different as that of the inhabitants on the two sides of the Pyrenees” (Elia 37). Lamb further speculates: “I have not been without my suspicions, that [Bowyer] was not altogether displeased at the contrast [Field’s students] presented to [Bowyer’s] end of the school. We were a sort of Helots to his young Spartans” (38). Lamb says that Bowyer’s pupils “cannot speak of him without something of terror allaying their gratitude” and describes the visions Elia had of Bowyer’s classroom as “glances of Tartarus” (39). Lamb claims that Boywer owned two wigs, one “serene, smiling, fresh powdered” which signaled to the students “a mild day;” the second wig
was “old, discolored, unkempt” and acted as an “angry caxon, denoting frequent and bloody execution. Woe to the school when he made his morning appearance in his passy or passionate wig” (sic, 40). Lamb describes Bowyer’s habit of suddenly springing from his office to threaten a boy with a beating, then returning to his office until the boy had regained composure and “totally forgotten the context” only to rush out again an yell “and I WILL too” (orig. emphasis, 40). Lamb also describes Bowyer’s habit of “whipping the boy, and reading the Debates, at the same time; a paragraph and a lash between,” which during the days “when parliamentary oratory was most at a height” meant a long and slow beating (40). While it would be easy to put Lamb’s descriptions of Bowyer’s cruelty under the category of exaggeration for ironic affect, Hunt’s memoirs offer more evidence without Elia’s occasional irony.

After giving Bowyer’s physical description, Hunt remembers Bowyer’s brutality as well, saying: “When you were out in your lesson, [Bowyer] turned upon you a round staring eye like a fish; and he had a trick of pinching you under the chin, and by the lobes of the ears, till he would make the blood come. He has many times lifted a boy off the ground in this way” (116-17). Hunt then exclaims:

He was, indeed, a proper tyrant, passionate and capricious; would take violent likes and dislikes to the same boys; fondle some without any apparent reason, though he had a leaning to the servile, and, perhaps, to the sons of rich people; and he would persecute others in a manner truly frightful. I have seen him beat a sickly-looking, melancholy boy (C-----n) about the head and ears, till the poor fellow, hot, dry-eyed, and confused, seemed lost in bewilderment. C-----n, not long after he took orders, died
out of his senses. I do not attribute that catastrophe to the master; and of course he could not wish to do him any lasting mischief. He had no imagination of any sort. But there is no saying how far his treatment of the boy might have contributed to prevent a cure. (117)

This describes a man intent on bullying and abusing the children he identified as the weakest or least politically powerful and describes Bowyer’s intentional targeting of children rather than only the actions of a bad-tempered or committed schoolmaster as he is so often described. In fact, Hunt underscores this by recalling a time when a boy turned on Bowyer verbally with “a torrent of invectives and threats” (122). Hunt explains that Bowyer did not pursue punishment of that student because Bowyer “did not like such matters to go before the governors” (122). This comment proves that Bowyer was aware that his behavior towards students and his penchant for beating them was excessive for both the era and his position, unlike what Weissman believes. It also puts Bowyer firmly in the mode of a perpetrator of abuse. Judith Herman describes these perpetrators as “[a]uthoritarian, secretive, sometimes grandiose, and even paranoid, the perpetrator is nevertheless exquisitely sensitive to the realities of power and to social norms. Only rarely does he get into difficulties with the law; rather, he seeks out situation where his tyrannical behavior will be tolerated, condoned, or admired” (75). In his position as the headmaster of the upper grammar school and charged with instructing boys from poor and mostly powerless families—families who could not effectively protest, Bowyer had the perfect position in which he could indulge himself in abusing the boys with very little fear of condemnation or interruption.
Despite his reluctance to discuss his school years truthfully, Coleridge describes some of the beatings he received at Bowyer’s hands in *Table Talk*. On 16 August 1832, Coleridge writes:

> The discipline at Christ’s Hospital in my time was ultra-Spartan; all domestic ties were to be put aside. ‘Boy!’ I remember Bowyer saying to me once when I was crying the first day of my return after the holidays, ‘Boy! the school is your father! Boy! the school is your mother! Boy! the school is your brother! the school is your sister! the school is your first cousin and your second cousin, and all the rest of your relations! Let’s have no more crying!’ *(sic*, 180)

This anecdote reveals several alarming issues. First, it shows how the school usurped the role of family in the minds of the children. Hunt comments on this as well in his discussion of how the boys were forced to refer to themselves as “orphans” (99-100). The second issue is that Bowyer is underscoring Coleridge’s total powerlessness—he is literally at the mercy of Bowyer and the school. The third issue is the emphasis on separating the child from his emotional ties to his family. Coleridge notes “all domestic ties were to be put aside” and notes that his beating was for the sadness he felt at leaving his family. This beating is part of a rather ingenious form of brainwashing.

Coleridge’s other public anecdote appeared in *Table Talk* on 27 May 1830. Coleridge suggestively titled this contribution “Flogging—Eloquence of Abuse.” Coleridge opens the article with the telling statement: “I had *one* just flogging” *(orig. emphasis, 102).* This simple statement shows that Coleridge was the victim of a number
of unjust beatings at Bowyer’s hands. The explanation behind the beating is also suggestive. Coleridge explains:

When I was about thirteen, I went to a shoemaker, and begged him to take me as his apprentice. He, being an honest man, immediately brought me to Bowyer, who got into a great rage, knocked me down, and even pushed Crispin [the shoemaker] rudely out of the room. Bowyer asked me why I had made myself such a fool? to which I answered that I had a great desire to be a shoemaker, and that I hated the thought of being a clergyman. ‘Why so?’ said he. —‘Because to tell you the truth sir,’ said I, ‘I am an infidel!’ For this, without more ado, Bowyer flogged me—wisely, as I think—soundly as I know. Any whining or sermonizing would have gratified my vanity, and confirmed me in my absurdity; as it was, I was laughed at, and got heartily ashamed of my folly. (103)

This tale also encodes Coleridge’s ambivalence towards Bowyer. Coleridge clearly appreciates that Bowyer did not allow him to leave school and sacrifice the continuation of his education as a result. One must ask, however, why was Coleridge willing to give up his education and future prospects for a trade? There are the standard interpretations: Coleridge was feeling particularly lazy and saw shoemaking as an easy way to make a living, or this infatuation was evidence of one of Coleridge’s impulsive actions, due to a particularly manic phase in his life. But what if the answer to the question “why” is revealed in the anecdote itself? What if the reasons Coleridge wanted to leave school were the beatings he received combined with the discussion that follows the description of the beatings and that discusses the eloquence of verbal abuse? Coleridge gives twenty-
nine examples of derogatory adjectives in use at that time, the least of which is “Fool” (103). It is clear that the memory of the physical abuse is closely tied to the idea of verbal abuse, even if Coleridge does not attribute any of the adjectives to Bowyer in his narrative. I believe Coleridge’s attempt to become the shoemaker’s apprentice, the only way he could leave the school under the contract his mother signed, is actually evidence of his attempt to escape Bowyer’s abuse; it was an encoded cry for help. At this point, Coleridge was an adolescent and possibly was trying to gain some control over his life and rid himself of some misery. After all, this episode took place during the time he insists that children should be “happy,” as quoted above which further implies that he was not happy at this time in his life (CN1, 1176). Gillman further illuminates the incident and gives more evidence for my theory by explaining that the shoemaker, and his wife “had been kindly attentive to [Coleridge], and this was sufficient to captivate his affectionate nature, which had existed from earliest childhood, and strongly endeared him to all around him” (21). Interestingly, Gillman says that Bowyer “pushed [the shoemaker] out of the room with such force, that [he] might have sustained an action at law against [Bowyer] for assault” (22). Clearly, some part of Coleridge saw his father in the shoemaker and was desperate for affection and kind attention from a male adult. Based upon Coleridge’s established emotional metaphors, the shoemaker filled the position nicely with the added benefit of allowing Coleridge to escape Bowyer’s cruelty.
Christ’s Hospital as a Place of Traumatic Captivity

The best way to judge the effect Coleridge’s time at Christ’s Hospital had on his psyche is to understand his early residence at the school as a form of traumatic captivity. While this may appear to be an extreme claim at first, an understanding of traumatic captivity will make the connection much clearer. Judith Herman points out, “[a] single traumatic event can occur almost anywhere. Prolonged, repeated trauma, by contrast, occurs only in circumstances of captivity” (74). Contrary to what one may believe, Herman explains that the barriers to escape captivity are generally invisible. They are “nonetheless extremely powerful,” and often “[c]hildren are rendered captive by their condition of dependency” (74). As noted above, Coleridge and his fellow students were dependent upon the school for everything from food to clothing, and, in Coleridge’s case, even their future occupations were in the school’s control. Hunt explains the school’s absolute control over the students—even on holidays: “In my time, [the boys] never slept out of the school, but on one occasion, during the whole of their stay; this was for three weeks in summer-time” (111-12). The limited time spent away from the school and the strict daily schedule would contribute to another one of Herman’s criteria, prolonged contact: “Captivity, which brings the victim into prolonged contact with the perpetrator, creates a special type of relationship, one of coercive control. This is true whether the victim is taken captive entirely by force, as in the case of prisoners and hostages, or by a combination of force, intimidation, and enticement” (74). While the boys may have entered the school voluntarily, the punishments for attempting to run away, as described by Lamb, show that once enrolled, they had little ability to separate themselves from the
power and control of the school. This inability to leave voluntarily creates a particular type of captivity; as Herman notes, “the perpetrator becomes the most powerful person in the life of the victim, and the psychology of the victim is shaped by the actions and beliefs of the perpetrator” (75). The control over the students was underscored and exacerbated by the poor diet. Herman explains: “When the victim is deprived of food, sleep, or exercise, this control results in physical debilitation. But even when the victim’s basic physical needs are entirely met, this assault on bodily autonomy shames and demoralizes her” (77). In this context, the school’s insistence that the children call themselves “orphans” as noted by Hunt, and the attempt by Bowyer to have Coleridge repudiate their families in favor of the school, take on a more significant role (Hunt 99).

According to Herman, in order to obtain coercive control over their victims, a captor must destroy all outside attachments and this “requires not only the isolation of the victim from others but also the destruction of her internal images of connection to others. For this reason, the perpetrator often goes to great lengths to deprive his victim of any objects of symbolic importance” (80). Herman specifically notes that in” religious cults, members may subjected to strict regulations of their diet and dress, and may be subjected to exhaustive questioning regarding their deviations from these rules” (78). In addition, like the governors of the school, a captor’s

first goal appears to be the enslavement of his victim, and he accomplishes this goal by exercising despotic control over every aspect of the victim’s life. But simple compliance rarely satisfies him; he appears to have a psychological need to justify his crimes, for this he needs the victims’ affirmation. Thus he relentlessly demands from his victim professions of
respect, gratitude, or even love. His ultimate goal appears to be the creation of a willing victim. (75)

Of course, not all children actually saw their school years as a form of traumatic captivity, but it is interesting to register how many of the school’s policies align with the methods of coercive captivity.

In addition, Bowyer’s abusive actions align closely with those of a captor. Herman explains that to control another person, the perpetrator must use “the systematic, repetitive infliction of psychological trauma. They are the organized techniques of disempowerment and disconnection. Methods of psychological control are designed to instill terror and helplessness and to destroy the victim’s sense of self in relation to others” (77). Remember Lamb’s story of how Bowyer would keep students perpetually afraid of his cruelty? Herman believes that this is an important tool for perpetrators because actual violence is not always necessary “to keep the victim in a constant state of fear” (77). She explains that perpetrators can increase fear “by inconsistent and unpredictable outbursts of violence and by capricious enforcement of petty rules. The ultimate effect of these techniques is to convince the victim that the perpetrator is omnipotent, that resistance is futile, and that her life depends upon winning his indulgence through absolute compliance” (77). In Biographia, Coleridge illustrates one of Bowyer’s “capricious enforcement of petty rules.” Coleridge explains how Bowyer would grade students’ work:

He would often permit our theme exercises, under some pretext of want of time, to accumulate, till each lad had four or five to be looked over. Then placing the whole number abreast on his desk, he would ask the writer,
why this or that sentence might not have found as appropriate a place
under this or that other thesis: and if no satisfying answer could be
returned, and two faults of the same kind were found in one exercise, the
irrevocable verdict followed, the exercise was torn up, and another on the
same subject to be produced, in addition to the tasks of the day. (160-61)

Ironically Coleridge explains he is telling the story because “I think it imitable and
worthy of imitation” (160). Note, though, that this anecdote shows how Bowyer used a
“pretext” to keep the boys off kilter in their otherwise predictable schedule. They had no
way of knowing when Bowyer would choose to collect their work. In addition, Bowyer’s
destruction of the boys’ essays shows contempt for their efforts. Finally, Bowyer placed
added stress and pressure on the children to produce several more essays, essays that
must surpass those already offered, in addition to the work already assigned for that day.
This probably made many boys feel as if they were in a situation where they could not
come out ahead. It would also further destroy any cohesive, positive sense of self the
youngsters were attempting to build.

If schooling at Christ’s Hospital was so traumatic, one may ask how the students
survived their experience? The answer to this is also the reason so many of Coleridge’s
and Lamb’s biographers believe their time at Christ’s Hospital was so important (and
positive!)—the bonds formed with other students. Herman emphasizes the importance of
these relationships: “As long as the victim maintains any other human connection, the
perpetrator’s power is limited” (79). Herman explains how this sense of connection
works in political prisoners, “the malignant relationship with the perpetrator may be
mitigated by attachments to people who share their fate. Those prisoners who have had
the good fortune to bond with others know the generosity, courage, and devotion that people can muster in extremity. The capacity to form strong attachments is not destroyed even under the most diabolical conditions” (91). Many of the bonds formed during Coleridge’s and Lamb’s school years were maintained, especially in the case of Lamb, for the remainder of their lives. In fact, an 1801 letter from Lamb to Coleridge shows that the graduates of Christ’s Hospital made a point to meet for dinner in London every year (LCML V. II, 81). According to Herman, the importance of these friendships during times of traumatic captivity cannot be overstated. These connections allow individuals to survive the most horrific conditions. In fact, “[a] study of prisoner relationships in [the Nazi concentration camps] found that the overwhelming majority of survivors became part of a ‘stable pair,’ a loyal buddy relationship of mutual sharing and protection, leading to the conclusion that the pair, rather than the individual, was the ‘basic unit of survival’” (92). This also helps explain why the solitary confinement of boys in the “dungeon” after their second attempt to run away was so devastating. The boys who experienced trauma at school would know that their friends had survived the same circumstances. They would have a frame of reference together that the world at large would not understand. In addition, each would act as a witness to the other of what they had experienced and survived. Hunt writes: “If I had reaped no other benefit from Christ-Hospital, the school would be forever dear to me from the recollection of the friendships I formed in it, and of the first heavenly taste it gave me of that most spiritual of the affections” (143). Lamb closes his Elia essay with a tribute to the friends he made at the school. As part of that description, he describes the friendship of Lancelot Pepys Stevens and “Dr. T-----e” into their later years:
You never met the one by chance in the street without a wonder, which was quickly dissipated by the almost immediate sub-appearance of the other. Generally arm-in-arm, these kindly coadutors lightened for each other the toilsome duties of their profession, and when, in advanced age, one found it convenient to retire, the other was not long in discovering that it suited him to lay down the fasces also. Oh, it is pleasant, as it is rare, to find the same arm linked in yours at forty, which at thirteen helped it to turn over the Cicero De Amicitia, or some tale of Antique Friendship, which the young heart even then was burning to anticipate! (42-43).

Because of the final emphasis, the essay ends on the high of nostalgic friendship rather than with the horrors of the school.

**Nightmares of Repressed Trauma**

It is all very well to claim Coleridge’s time at Christ’s Hospital was traumatic, but is there evidence of this trauma in his writing? In order to explore his writings, first one must understand the types of symptoms a person traumatized by captivity would exhibit. Herman explains: “People subjected to prolonged, repeated trauma develop an insidious progressive form of post-traumatic stress disorder that invades and erodes the personality. While a victim of a single acute trauma may feel after the event that she is ‘not herself,’ the victim of chronic trauma may feel herself to be changed irrevocably, or she may lose the sense that she has any self at all” (86). This would be another reason, especially
when added to Coleridge’s unsuccessful grief, for his sense of self to be so fractured and for his self-narrative to be so negative. Most telling, Herman has found that “psychosomatic reactions were found to be practically universal” (86). She believes this is because “[c]hronically traumatized people no longer have any baseline state of physical calm or comfort” (86). Therefore, “they perceive their bodies as having turned against them. They begin to complain, not only of insomnia and agitation, but also of numerous types of somatic symptoms. Tension headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, and abdominal, back, or pelvic pain are extremely common” (86). Coleridge exhibits evidence of all of these symptoms in his notebooks and letters. In particular, he discusses the issue in a July 1805 entry when he was in Malta:

Saturday Morning-night i.e. 3 o’clock with no glimpse of Dawn. 20 July 1805, Treasury—How often am I doomed to perceive & wonder at the generation of violent Anger in dreams, in consequence of any pain or distressful sensation in the bowels or lower parts of the Stomach/When I have awoke in agony of pure Terror, my stomach I have found uniformly stretched with wind/but anger not excluding but taking the Lead of Fear, the bowels, and then most commonly it is ‘Le Grice’—S.T. Coleridge (CN 2, 2613)

One of Coleridge’s lifelong quests was to explain why his nightmares would manifest into physical pain when he awoke. Based on the science of the day, especially David Hartley, Friedrich Schelling, and David Hume, Coleridge tried to believe that it was the physical pain that caused the mental agitation, but he could never fully embrace this idea. Alan Richardson believes that “Coleridge’s enduring interests in medicine, physiology,
and mind-body relations contributed in no small part to his profound (though mostly unpublished) speculative work on emotional and non-conscious aspects of mental life and artistic creativity” (47). Herman notes that even modern trauma survivors have a difficult time understanding their symptoms. She explains: “they may become so accustomed to their condition that they no longer recognize the connection between their bodily distress symptoms and the climate of terror in which these symptoms were formed” (86).

Maguson believes that, ultimately, Coleridge’s studies made his mental “agony” worse because “every time he tried to escape his feelings by diverting his attention to philosophy, philosophy and religion presented him with the image of the harmonious soul that he knew he could never realize within himself” (117). John Beer believes that understanding Coleridge’s poetry involves “appreciating the various patterns of understanding that played in Coleridge’s mind as he tried to maintain his Christian faith while also contributing all that he had learned from contemporary scientific lore and his reading of romances” (118). He argues that by “dramatizing the conflicts at work he was able to enhance his poetic achievement” (118). However, despite his enhanced creativity, Coleridge was unable to integrate his memories into his shattered self-identity/narrative and put an end to his nightmares.

In addition, Herman’s discussion of traumatized individuals explains why Coleridge saw himself as segregated and alone while at school, when Lamb remembers him surrounded by friends and admirers. Herman states:

the features of post-traumatic stress disorder [resulting from prolonged captivity] that become most exaggerated in chronically traumatized people are avoidance or constriction. When the victim has been reduced to a goal
of simple survival, psychological constriction becomes an essential form of adaptation. This narrowing applies to every aspect of life—to relationships, activities, thoughts, memories, emotions, and even sensations. And while this constriction is adaptive in captivity, it also leads to a kind of atrophy in the psychological capacities that have been suppressed and to the over-development of a solitary inner life. (87)

Coleridge, who entered the school with extensive psychological damage from his unsuccessful grief, would have further narrowed his focus to things that he could understand and/or control. This helps explain his intense involvement in his fantasies, and when coupled with the Morrisons’ belief that a child like Coleridge would depend upon fantasy to help sustain himself in difficult situations, it becomes clear that he used fantasy as an escape. Coleridge told Gillman, “[f]rom eight to fourteen I was a playless daydreamer, a helluo librorum” (17). This self-description provides some proof that Coleridge’s life was lived in his own internal fantasy world. Gillman recalls a tale Coleridge told that illustrates this commitment to escape the real world through fantasy. As a young boy, he slipped out of the school one day and was accused of being a pickpocket because “in one of his day-dreams,” Coleridge “fanc[ied] himself swimming across the Hellespont” and while “thrusting his hands before him as in the act of swimming, his hand came in contact with a gentleman’s pocket” (17). Coleridge “sobbed out his denial of the intention, and explained to [the gentleman] how he thought himself Leander, swimming across the Hellespont” (17). The gentleman was “so struck and delighted with the novelty of the thing, and with the simplicity and intelligence of the boy” that he subscribed Coleridge to a “circulating library in King Street” (17).
Coleridge is so invested in his fantasy that he lost track of his placement in the real world. As a student, dressed in the customary and easily recognized school uniform, Coleridge was risking severe punishment for leaving the school grounds if caught. However, his fantasy so consumed him that he lost touch with the reality of his precarious situation. Gillman recounts another of Coleridge’s tales of fantasies overtaking him, this time in the infirmary of the school, when he was fourteen—beyond the usual age of such fantasies. Coleridge specifically states that he had “a continual low fever” so the fantasy cannot be blamed on hallucination from a high fever. He remembers fancying himself “on Robinson Crusoe’s island, finding a mountain of plumb-cake, and eating a room for myself, and then eating it into the shapes of tables and chairs” (20). Coleridge astutely attributes this fantasy to “hunger and fancy” (20). On first glance, both of these incidents may seem like regular imaginative child’s play, but it is important to note how fully the fancies/fantasies consumed Coleridge and that he was dependent upon them as a self-protective and an escape measure.

Even Coleridge’s inclinations to hide the negative aspects of his time with Bowyer are touched on by Herman. She explains: “People in captivity become adept practitioners of the arts of altered consciousness. Through the practice of dissociation, voluntary thought suppression, minimization, and sometimes outright denial, they learn to alter an unbearable reality” (87). When this trait is combined with Coleridge’s penchants for mythmaking and for comparing the male authority figures in his life to his father, often almost making them over in his father’s image, his public refusal to admit to the horrors he faced under Bowyer and at Christ’s Hospital make sense. Weissman strongly believes that Coleridge found in Bowyer, “a clergyman-schoolmaster who cared
about him,” a father figure (21). If this is true, Coleridge would have an even harder time reconciling the abusive Bowyer with his idealized father. Coleridge would need to create a mental metaphor/myth where the reality of the abusive individual was either repressed and/or where the person was justified in his actions, which is what he ultimately chose to do in his public writing. In *Biographia*, Coleridge tells readers that he had “enjoyed the inestimable advantage of a very sensible, though at the same time a very severe master” (159). This implies that Bowyer’s severity was limited to his classroom requirements and, therefore, justified. Furthermore, Coleridge says that Bowyer was “zealous and conscientious” and that he “is now gone to his final reward, full of years and full of honors, even of those honours which were dearest to his heart, as gratefully bestowed by that school, and still binding him to the interests of that school, in which he had been himself educated, and to which during his whole life he was a dedicated thing” (161).

Aside from the mention of nightmares and his two anecdotes in *Table Talk* above, Coleridge appears to be very attached to Bowyer, and thus presents him to the public without his serious faults—in the same way John Coleridge Sr. is presented. In Reginald Brimley Johnson’s history of Christ’s Hospital, he even prints the poem seventeen-year-old Coleridge wrote in praise of the school, “Anthem: For the Children of Christ’s Hospital.” Despite Coleridge’s assertion in *Biographia* that Bowyer taught his students the joy of simple poetry, the overwrought “Anthem” is anything but simple (159-60). The poem begins by asking seraphs to “teach our feeble tongues like yours the song/ Of fervent gratitude to raise” and ends by telling the children to “cease thy wailings drear” and “let full gratitude now prompt the tear/ Which erst did sorrow force to flow” because “soon his path the sun of love shall warm; / And each glad scene look brighter for the
storm” (xxiii-xxiv). The poem, like Coleridge himself, focuses on the idea that the children should feel grateful for the education and the home the school provides.

However, Coleridge’s public alteration of his unbearable reality did not make the traumatic memories fade. In fact, it may have made them worse. Coburn translates a journal entry Coleridge wrote in Greek, during the month of May in 1807 as follows: “Thought becomes a thing when it acts at once on your more [?conscious/consciousness] i.e. [?conscience/conscientiousness] therefore I dread to tell my whole & true case it seems to make a substantial reality/ I want it to remain a thought in which I may be deceived whole [?wholly]” (CN2, 3045 & n.). I believe Coleridge was consciously attempting to deceive himself and his circle of friends and acquaintances—to keep the truth of his experiences from becoming his reality. Manguson contends that this intentional deceit was translated directly into despair “that he felt occasionally while he was writing his best poetry” and that it “became the habit of his soul after 1802 when his verse is haunted by specters and abstractions whose sole reality is in his mind” (17). Unfortunately, as many of Coleridge’s poems show, “[t]he poetry that Coleridge hoped would be a waking dream becomes even more explicitly a waking nightmare” (Manguson 94). Coleridge’s hidden thoughts and truth, his hidden autobiography, became a part of his reality, through his poetry, no matter how hard he tried to hide them, which fits the connection between childhood loss and creativity that both Weissman and the Morrisons describe.

Like all trauma survivors, Coleridge was subject to “the chronic hyperarousal and intrusive symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder [that] fuse with vegetative symptoms of depression, producing what [W.G.] Niederland [in his article ‘The
“Survivor Syndrome” calls the ‘survivor triad’ of insomnia, nightmares, and psychosomatic complaints (Herman 94). This helps to explain Coleridge’s overriding anxiety, his bouts of depression, and his many digestive complaints. The memories he is (barely) able to keep at bay during his day (and only at a high cost to his nervous system), intrude when he relaxes his vigilance at night and cannot be abated. Many of Coleridge’s notebook entries document the intense presence of Christ’s Hospital and Bowyer in his dreams—forced to the forefront by his subconscious. Coleridge writes about his difficulties in 1796 and 1797. First he notes his difficulty in finding a reason for his distress, writing, “[o]ur quaint metaphysical opinions in an hour of anguish like playthings by the bedside of a child deadly sick” (CN1, 188). A few entries later, he begins his discussion of dreams that will continue to repeat throughout his notebooks: “In a distempered dream things & forms in themselves common & harmless inflict a terror of anguish” (205). One-hundred and twenty-nine entries later, the subject reappears, “[a]ll our notions husked in the phantasms of Place & Time, that still escape the finest sieve & most searching Winnow of our Reason & Abstraction” (334). His frustration with not being able to apply reason to his nightmares is apparent in this entry. Despite his many studies, Coleridge’s nightmares continue, and on 3 October 1803, he writes:

Night—My Dreams uncommonly illustrative of the non-existence of Surprize in sleep—I had dreamt that I was asleep in the Cloyster at Christ’s Hospital & <had> awoken with a pain in my hand from some corrosion/boys & nurses daughters peeping at me/ On their implying that I was not in the School, I answered yes I am/I am only twenty—I then
recollected that I was thirty, & of course could not be in the School—and was perplexed—but not in the least surprised that I could fall into such an error. (CN 1, 1250)

Note that Coleridge’s subconscious is telling him that he is still trapped in the school. Despite his more rational mind reminding him that he is thirty, he is not surprised to find himself at the school. It is also important to notice that even at the beginning of the dream, he tells his dream figures that he is twenty. Coleridge actually physically left Christ’s Hospital at the age of eighteen; however, he is still acknowledging his emotional and psychological captivity at the age of twenty.

In fact, Coleridge’s many night terrors often involved Bowyer and the school. In 1802, Coleridge writes an unaccompanied line in his notebook, which appears to sum up his frustration: “Bloody hand had he? School boy made ideot by cruelty of Schoolmaster” (sic, 1094). The repetitive intrusion is noted by Coleridge on 19 October 1803, when he writes, “I slept again with dreams of sorrow & pain, tho’ not of downright Fright & prostration/I was worsted but not conquered—in sorrows and in sadness & in sore & angry Struggles—but not trampled down/but this will all come again, if I do not take care” (1157). However, Coleridge’s conscious suppression of the memories during the daytime could not/would not make the fear and pain go away. On 10 November 1803, Coleridge recorded another dream invaded by his schoolmaster:

½ past 2 o’clock, Morning. Awoke after long struggles & with faint screaming from a persecuting Dream. The Tale of the Dream began in two Images—in two Sons of a Nobleman, desperately fond of shooting—brought out by the Footman to resign their Property, & to be made believe
that they had none / they were far too cunning for that / as they struggled & resisted their cruel Wongers, & my Interest for them, I suppose, increased, I became they—the duality vanished—Boyer & Christ’s Hospital became concerned—yet still the former Story was kept up—and I was conjuring him, as he met me in the Streets, to have pity on a Nobleman’s Orphan, when I was carried back to bed, & was struggling up against an unknown impediment. (CN1, 1649)

Upon awakening from this dream, Coleridge notes, “the first thing I became conscious of, was a faint double scream, that I uttered” (1649). In this dream Coleridge is wrestling with the idea that he was deprived of something of value (perhaps his childhood?). Manguson underscores the importance of the repeated images in Coleridge’s nightmares, saying: “Unfortunately for his peace of mind, too often his diseased imagination exposed his fears and feelings of guilt, and the greater the vividness of his creations, the greater his conviction that they were substantial realities” (56). This dream clearly shows how he struggled to integrate his horrible experiences with the gratitude he feels he should have for both Bowyer and the school and the opportunities they provided.

A month later, the dreams occur again and Coleridge writes his dream down at three o’clock in the morning on 13 December 1803: “Bad dreams/ How often of a sort/ at the university—a mixture of Xts Hospital Church/escapes there—lose myself” (CN1, 1726). This dream is extremely violent and confused. Coleridge dreams he is attacked by “a fat sturdy Boy of about 14,” and when he calls his friends to help, “they come & join in the Hustle against me” (1726). The dream becomes confusing when a harlot he knew at Cambridge chases him, he calls out to a “whole Troop of people in sight” and
realizes that he cannot “awake” (1726). The dream then shifts to different halls and streets—a confusion of images. At this point in the entry, Coleridge suddenly notes that Bowyer made his appearance in “the early part of the dream” (1726). Coleridge remembers, “Boyer & two young Students, & R. Allen; Le Grice & I quizzing” then writes “N.B. arrogant sense of intellectual superiority under circumstances of depression, but no envy” (1726). It is unclear whether the two younger students have the arrogance or if it is Coleridge. It is possible that he is discussing himself because he notes that the arrogance occurs “under circumstances of depression” (1726). After this mention of Bowyer, Coleridge returns to the harlot and notes the reappearance of a young male prostitute from a previous dream in which he had attacked Coleridge by “leaping” on him and grasping his “Scrotum;” Coleridge also notes that he is afraid to turn the boy down so he pays him just to be rid of him (1726). Interestingly, he believes a pain in his side causes part of the dream where “a fellow knuckle[ed]” him in that exact spot. Coleridge then attempts to force himself awake by screaming, and after dreaming he wakes screaming once, he tries again until he really does awake screaming.

In January 1804, Coleridge believes, for an instant, he has found the reason for his dreams and actually makes a profound statement. He writes:

After I had got into bed last night, I said to myself, that I had been pompously enunciating, as a difficulty, a problem of easy & common solution/ viz. that it was the effect of Association, we from Infancy up to Manhood under Parents, Schoolmasters, Tutors, Inspectors, &c having had our pleasures & pleasant self-chosen Pursuits (self-chosen because pleasant, and not originally pleasant because self-chosen) interrupted, &
we forced into dull unintelligible Rudiments or painful Labor/ —Now, all
Duty is felt as a command, commands most often, & therefore by Laws of
Association felt as if always, from without & consequently, calling up the
Sensations &c of the pains endured from Parents’, Schoolmasters’ &c
&c—commands from without. (CN1, 1833)
Coleridge is beginning to understand his association of unconnected ideas and sensations
with the “pain endured” from parents and schoolmasters. This pain permeates his choices
because he feels as if he really has never had a choice. Sadly for Coleridge and the
potentially early development of formal psychology, he repudiates this discovery because
he woke “with gouty suffocation” and saw that the “phænomenon occurred far too early”
to be attached to “pain suffered from Parents,’ and Schoolmasters,’ &c,” because he is
already observing the phenomenon in his infant son Hartley (CN1, 1833). However,
Coleridge does note that individuals “who are most reverie-ish & streamy,” those who
live in their own heads, such as himself and Hartley, are most affected (1833). It is
evident that on some level Coleridge is attempting to understand the roles that the
traumatic loss of his father (and possibly his brother) and the traumatic captivity he
experienced at school played in his development, but he is unable to link the puzzle
pieces to form an answer supported by his observations and the science of the day.
Richardson notes that Coleridge read widely including Darwin’s Zoonomia, and works
on brain science from Gall, Spurzheim, and Cabanis—the leading neuroscientist of the
day—in an attempt to find answers (47). Five days after his notebook entry, in a letter to
Richard Sharp, Coleridge tells how the “fearful Distresses of [his] sleep” have “taken
away” the “connecting Link of voluntary power, which continually combines that Part of
us by which we know ourselves to be, with that outward Picture or Heiroglyphic” (CL V. II 1032). His nightmares made him see and feel a disconnection between his inner, wounded psyche and his outer appearance as a learned scholar.

It appears that on some level Coleridge recognized that his experiences at school must be responsible for his night terrors. In April 1804, he is troubled by his love for Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth’s sister-in-law, which appears to exacerbate his nightmares. However in the midst of this, he coins a phrase for his nightmares when he writes “but the more distressful my Sleep, & alas! how seldom is it otherwise, the more distant, & Xst’s Hospitalized the forms & incidents” (CN 2, 2055). That Coleridge calls his nightmares Christ’s Hospitalized proves that he has knowledge on some level of the reason its images and his experiences at the school keep invading his dreams. He also notes that the more he is distraught, as he is over “Isulia,” one of his code names for Hutchinson, the more open he is to the intrusion of his past trauma. And indeed, Coleridge will continue to be haunted by his memories because he has not yet, nor will he ever, incorporate the image of himself as a child victim into his self-narrative of Coleridge the adult. One must point out that in April of 1804, Coleridge travels to Malta so he is in unfamiliar territory and is separated from his support system of friends. He only gets support through the occasional letter. In addition having already run to Malta to escape his marriage, he is essentially trapped there by his job and responsibilities and would remain so until 1806. Perhaps because he felt trapped and powerless again, the memories of Christ’s Hospital were even more intrusive. Of course by the time Coleridge went to Malta, he was extremely dependent upon opium to help manage his
psychological and psychosomatic symptoms, which may have helped shape his depression.

By May of 1804, Coleridge’s nightmares take over his notebook. He records four entries in one month that show how horrible his dreams have become. On 6 May, he writes: “these Sleeps, these Horrors, these frightful Dreams of Despair when the sense of the individual Existence is full & lively only <for one> to *feel* oneself powerless, crushed *in* by every power—a stifled boding, one abject miserable Wretch/ yet hopeless, yet struggling, removed from all touch of Life, deprived of all notion of Death/ strange mixture of Fear and Despair” (CN2, 2078). This entry shows that his sense of alienation and powerlessness is growing. His sense of suffocation comes through clearly in his phrasing. By the end of the month, he conflates his time at the school and his night spent near the river Otter as a child when he writes: “for Sleep a pandemonium of all the shames & miseries of the past Life from early childhood all huddled together, & bronzed with one stormy Light of Terror & Self-torture” (CN2, 2091). In this entry, it is clear that Coleridge feels that some of the blame for his nightmares must fall on himself. This is evidence that he lacks a sense of self, as both the Morrisons and Herman believe an individual who experienced unsuccessful grief and repeated trauma would believe. It is also interesting that there are no extant letters written by Coleridge during this time—Charles’ and Mary Lamb’s letters during this time period often mention that they have not received any word from Coleridge so there may, in fact, not have been any written. It is as if he has turned so far inward in search of self, that he cannot even apply to his circle of friends for help.
The next year, 1805, also spent alone in Malta, produced some interesting dreams that Coleridge felt he had to record. On 9 April 1805, nearly a year after he christens his dreams with the Christ’s Hospitalization appellation, he appears to be interested in the images of the dreams rather than the emotions behind them. In this entry he begins the recollection of his dream by titling the entry “Wonderful Blending of Ideas in Dreams” (CN2, 2359). The dream that follows is surreal and the images seamlessly flow together in the same manner they do in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan.” He writes:

I have this very moment left my Bed—part of my Dream is too strange & the feelings connected with the images in sleep too different from those which would have been connected with the same awake to mention/I shall only therefore note these/There was a Desk, like that of a Master’s at the upper end of a School/ for School & Desk &c it always will be when I an ill; so deep has been the impression of those days in which my ill-health no doubt originated! /and Middleton, who was my superior, my friend and Patron at School, my friend for the first year at College, who never quarreled with me but was quietly alienated, was there and received me kindly—with him was blended a series of images entirely dependent, as I found on awaking, on the state in which Flatulence had placed the different parts of my Body—he went away— & I lay down at the bottom of the Desk, & heard a Clergyman quoting aloud a Text from St Paul, as from the Pulpit in the next Room/ without any feeling of surprize—the next instant it was St Paul himself, & no surprize did I feel! —Then Middleton returned & reproved me severely for taking Liberties on the
slightest encouragement, & sitting thus by his Fire/Till that moment it had
been the bottom of a Desk, & no Fire/but now there was a little obscure
fire-place—all this without surprise— & I awoke” (2359).

Notice that in the first portion of the dream, Coleridge notes that he will always have
images of school and the headmaster’s desk when he is ill. This shows his understanding
and acknowledgment of his trauma on some level. The vision then connects the desk
with Middleton, who was indeed Coleridge’s friend, but who was also responsible for
Coleridge being drafted into Bowyer’s circle of control at Christ’s Hospital. Middleton is
then connected with a clergyman, which makes sense because Middleton became a
bishop. However, it is interesting that the clergyman turns into Saint Paul, who was
tested with the thorn in his side and in continual pain. In Second Corinthians 12:7, Paul
explains: “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the
revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet
me, lest I should be exalted above measure” (KJV). Coleridge could be, in his opium-
influenced dreams, feeling some kinship to Paul who worked to spread the Christian faith
throughout the Mediterranean and who was shipwrecked/trapped on Malta for three
months. It is interesting that Middleton rebukes Coleridge for taking up Paul’s time and a
place by his fire. This is probably Coleridge’s sense of alienation and unworthiness
making an appearance in the voice and body of Middleton who had a stellar career,
especially in comparison to Coleridge’s lack of direction. The fire image may also be a
subconscious rebuke for his earlier belief that he was inspired by anything good or godly.
Note, though, that the desk of Christ’s Hospital turned into the fire. This could be
another unconscious acknowledgement of the link between Coleridge’s trauma and
creativity. It is easy to assume that part of the reason the images from the nightmare flow as smoothly as they do in “Kubla Khan” is that both were results of opium-induced dreams, but in the years that separate the two writings, Coleridge has lost any sense of a positive self and is mired in guilt, anxiety, and negativity. His inability to integrate trauma into his self-narrative has taken a toll on his psyche and his ability to write.

Dependent on the science of the day, Coleridge generally attempted to connect his dreams to a bodily function. What we would call somatization of his psychic pain today, Coleridge considered as the reverse. Although Hartley, Hume, Gall, and Spurzheim were making some strides in understanding brain function, their versions still cannot fully explain the connections between illness and bad dreams. Coleridge, however, was never truly satisfied with these discussions, as is evidenced in his 20 July 1805 notebook entry quoted earlier: “How often am I doomed to perceive & wonder at the generation of violent Anger in dreams, in consequence of any pain or distressful sensation in the bowels or lower parts of the Stomach/When I have awoke in agony of pure Terror, my stomach I have found uniformly stretched with wind” (CN2, 2613). Later that month, after meeting a young man with whom he attended Christ’s Hospital and did not recognize at first, Coleridge’s notebook expresses how powerfully intrusive his Christ’s Hospital memories can be. The minute he hears “my name is Merrick” from the young man, Coleridge writes, “that instance all was broad daylight/Jenny Edwards, the Sick Ward, 50 things, O power of words! — O the dignity of language!” (CN2, 2619). The mere mention of a name from that time of his life is enough to flood his mind with memories of the school, his nurse’s daughter (for whom he had written “Genevieve”), and the sick ward in which he had spent so much of his final year at school.
By September of 1805, Coleridge’s frustration in the lack of answers is apparent when he writes: “Friday Morning, 2 o’clock/7 September 1805. —Yes, a shocking recollection, that years have passed to a man in the prime of manhood/on every night of which he has dreaded to go to bed or fall asleep/& by that dread seduced to again & again & again poison himself” (CN2, 2666). Gregory Leadbetter explains Coleridge’s motivation in more modern terms: “Coleridge’s work demonstrates a provisional psychology that combines activity and passivity, in the willing exposure to the self to forces greater than it could control. On this model, the will enables experience, rather than being its master (167-8). In this entry, both sides of Coleridge are apparent: the side that attempts to rationally sort through his extensive knowledge to understand why he thinks, dreams, and behaves as he does—the budding psychologist who falls so frustratingly short; and the side that so irritated De Quincy, a friend and fellow opium addict, because Coleridge will not take ownership of his addiction but instead places the blame on his nightmares and need for sleep. I believe that both the compulsive search for answers and the opium were attempts at self-medication. However, Coleridge’s vast store of knowledge and lack of self-control made him feel extremely guilty over his opium addiction while at the same time, as a part of his personal myth, he could not accept the idea that he was an addict.

Coleridge never gave up his search for the reasons behind his night terrors. In his attempt to isolate the connection between memory and nightmares, he coined the word that is used today to understand where those memories intrude from—subconscious. The first known instance of the word is in a notebook entry written between sometime October and November of 1806, after Coleridge returned to England from Malta.
Coleridge describes “Memory” as “a wan misery-Eyed Female, still gazing with snatches of the eye at present forms to annihilate the one though into which her Being had been absorbed— & every form recalled & refixed” (CN2, 2915). He continues by revealing that Memory “fed on bitter fruits from the Tree of Life— & often she attempted to tear off from her forehead a seal, which Eternity had placed there; and instantly she found in her Hand a hideous phantom of her own visage” (2915). This visage makes Memory’s hand numb, so that the visage belongs “only to the eye alone, & like a <distant> rock in a rain-mist, distinguishable by one shade only of substance” (2915). There are two important features to note in Coleridge’s description of memory to this point. The first is that she only feeds on the bitter fruits of life, which signifies bad memories are more prevalent than good memories. The second is the seal on her forehead, much like the mark of Cain. This seal cannot be removed and any attempt to do so results in Memory seeing an even more horrendous form of herself (possibly the one-dimensional nightmares?). At the end of this description, Coleridge adds a translation for himself, writing “i.e. the vision enriched by subconsciousness of palpability by influent recollections of Touch” (2915). What does this mean? Based upon the uses of the word “palpable” during Coleridge’s time, it could mean one of three things, according to the Oxford English Dictionary: “of darkness, mist, heat, etc. so extreme or intense as to seem almost tangible;” “readily perceptible by a sense other than touch;” or “of a fact, idea, or characteristic easily perceived by the mind” (OED). The word “influential” also has several meanings: “flowing in;” the flowing in of God or the Holy Spirit in a transfigurative sense; “exercising celestial or astral influence or occult power” or “exercising (mental, moral, or physical) influence on” or upon something—although this usage appears to
have peaked in the 1600s, we cannot rule it out because of Coleridge’s penchant for archaic words (OED). Given these choices, it appears that he wanted to remind himself that the “hideous phantom,” which Memory held in her hand, was given physical weight because her subconscious remembers that the visage of her face is touchable, it nudges (flows in to) Memory’s conscious mind to feel the weight of an insubstantial phantom. This translation also fits Coleridge’s own experience with nightmares where he is still affected by pain that is no longer physically there.

Coleridge’s obsession with Memory, as a negative entity, is reinforced by a notebook entry written between November and December of 1806:

To Fear—most men affected by belief of reality attached to the wild-weed specters of infantine nervousness—but I affected by them simply, & of themselves—/ but for the last years I own & mourn a more deleterious Action of Fear—fear of horrors in Sleep, driving me to dreadful remedies & stimuli when awake, not for the present Sensation, but to purchase daily a wretched Reprieve from the torments of each night’s Dæmons/ selling myself to the Devil to avoid the Devil’s own Visitations, & thereby becoming his Subject. (CN2, 2944)

More and more often, Coleridge is equating his fears with his addiction and with his unworthiness/poor moral character. Whether it is the opium or, more likely, a combination of the opium and his repressed/oppressive memories that are causing his nightmares, he feels caught in an endless cycle of fear, nightmares, and opium. He feels as if he is losing his attachment to reality because of the overwhelming power of his fears.
Even as late as 1827, seven years before his death, Coleridge is still attempting to decode the reasons for his nightmares in his notebooks. On 1 December 1827, he writes:

As Dream-images are the Fluxionary Power—i.e. the intermediate of Life and Mind-Fancy— — —(N.B. I here include Sense, in the like manner as I use Mind in it’s widest sense, as Subject-Object, without deviation from the former arrangement of Sense, Fancy, Understanding; Understanding, Imagination Reason—in which I considered Mind abstractly from Life) — — — and as these products of Fancy are the Object <either simply or> containing the Subject and the Objectivity is connected with Life, Sensation, and yet in the form of Mind, hence the Dreamatis Personæ are combined with motives, generally suggested by Passions. The great point will be to determine the locality first what the Passions are, and then the locality of the source of each in the organic System—Fear, terror, from the vascular system? From the Blood? —Rage— what share has the Gall-secreting organ in this?—Qy.— The lowest abdomen in and near the Rectum, which has so manifest an influence in Dreams, does it act by itself—or not rather by pressure on <the> nerves of higher organs?—But whence come the malignancy so generally attributed to, or perceived as being in the Personages in dreams of Dyspepsy?—The Sneer—the triumph in the mortification & perplexity of the I? Whence too that heartless Apathy? — See pains of Sleep. (CN5, 5677)

Again, the influence of Hume is present in this entry as are Coleridge’s readings of Schelling and the work of Henry Davey in the attempt to connect his psychosomatic
symptoms with his dreams and how the body and mind act together to produce his dreams. However, note that he ultimately returns to a poem written decades before, a poem that ended with self imposed feelings of guilt and vulnerability. One should also note the staccato tempo of Coleridge’s writing; his attempts to both question and connect his experiences and his knowledge. Because of this, Joel Faflak argues: “Psychology mesmerizes metaphysics, however, to suggest Coleridge’s struggle to work-through a psychoanalytical apparatus commensurate wit his self-observation, so that he remains compelled to return to his early poems”(27). I believe Coleridge is still trying to puzzle out the “why” of his dreams in hopes of conquering them once and for all. In the entry, he next makes the distinction between dreams and delusions:

Every Dream has it’s scheme/ and is very different from Delirium—more different I suspect, than can be fairly explained by comparing the Delirium to a confusion of single types, a Dream to a confusion of Stereotypes. — This greater difference ought to exist, if Dream-imaging be the symbolic Language of what in the waking state would be, Pains, and of vital processes, efforts &c. (5677)

Coleridge ends this paragraph by returning to memory as “this primary characteristic of the Dream, the conversion of Pain into mental affections” and noting that this “harmonizes completely with the theory of their antithetic Objectivity” (5677). In his mind, nightmares are always associated with pain and memory, and memory consists of pain—another indication of the intrusive nature of his traumatic memories. Coleridge’s entry ends with this astute observation: “In the waking state the products of the Fancy are in unity with the I; in sleep in opposition” (5677). Manguson argues that this entry shows
“Coleridge was careful to distinguish between a dream and a nightmare. The dream occurs during sleep, but the nightmare occurs most often in the interval between sleep and waking, when all the faculties are awake but operating imperfectly” (55). This may be so, but Manguson’s interpretation does not account for the negative nature of the dreams or the connection with pain that Coleridge emphasizes in the entry. I believe this statement confirms what Coleridge’s notebook entries have been saying for decades—he can keep his sense of who he is somewhat stable as long as he is awake; when he sleeps, however, his subconscious takes over and his sense of self is fragmented with the return of the trauma experienced throughout his lifetime. In reality, given his lack of restful sleep and his unacknowledged trauma, it is remarkable that Coleridge was able to keep his sanity at all.
A Poem Born of Nightmares and Trauma Survival

Coleridge’s traumatic nightmares surface in his “supernatural” poetry most often. “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is the most nightmarish of them all because there is no end to the Mariner’s cycle. But the poem is more than just a nightmare; it is the story of survival and the cost of that survival without the integration of the trauma into one’s self-narrative. It is, in short, the story of Coleridge’s life-long psychological battle with his own trauma. In the poem, the Mariner recounts his hellish voyage to the Antarctic, during which he kills an albatross, suffers the death of all of his shipmates, and encounters some supernatural forces to return to England where he finds he has the compulsion to stop strangers and tell them his tale. After all, Weissman reminds us, on “occasions Coleridge would appear to be driven by an urgent pressure of speech and a giddy flight of ideas whose remote sources he could neither fathom nor entirely control,” this is very much like the Mariner’s compulsion (8). Weissman believes that, when the poem is interpreted “as a survivor’s nightmare,” it casts light on Coleridge’s inability to enjoy life in the present after suffering and early tragedy” (127). One characteristic of the poem that is most often noted by critics is importance of guilt and the need for what literary critics call sympathy, but traumatologists, such as Herman and Bessel van der Kolk, call empathy—an in-depth acceptance and understanding of the narrative. Douglas Angus believes that the poem “is essentially revelation of guilt and an appeal for sympathy. For Coleridge too, who stands behind the ancient mariner, the poem is essentially a partial revelation through symbol of a sense of guilt and an appeal for sympathy” (660). The Mariner needs someone who will listen to/witness his suffering in order to ameliorate the trauma. Herman explains that the “core experiences of
psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections” (133). She emphasizes that recovery from trauma “can only take place within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (133). It is the Mariner’s search for that relationship that causes him to “stoppeth one of three” guest on the way into the wedding in Part I (2). As Eric G. Wilson argues, the “Mariner must oscillate between the limbo of division and the joy of concord” (36). Although, I would say that the Mariner oscillates between division and the potential joy of concord, as he never reaches this state. I believe that it is also the lack of relationship and connection with the other sailors on the ship that causes the Mariner to shoot the albatross. The Mariner, when telling the tale, is very specific about the albatross’ actions. He says that the bird “ever day, for food or play, / Came to the mariner’s hollo!” (73-4). The Mariner does not say that the albatross came to him; it comes to an unnamed mariner. After killing the bird, he repeats this image, explaining that “no sweet bird did follow, / Nor any day for food or play / Came to the mariners’ hollo!” (emphasis added, 88-90). This time the apostrophe makes it clear that the bird responded to many mariners—but not the Mariner.

It is clear from the beginning of the poem that there is something in the Mariner’s psyche that is aberrational. For the most part, the Mariner mentions interactions that are persecuting. He claims that the storm “Was tyrannous and strong” and that “He,” giving the storm agency, “chased us south along” (42-4). He appears to believe that the cracking ice is growling, roaring and howling at him (61). The Mariner’s only interactions with the other crew members are when they accuse him of doing “a hellish thing” by killing the bird, when they give him “evil looks” and hang the albatross around
the Mariner’s neck, and later when they each “curse” the Mariner as they die (91, 139, 215). In all of the other lines in which the Mariner describes the ship’s crew, there is a distance imposed. He says that “we did speak only to break / The silence of the sea,” but this is after the crew has ostracized him by hanging the dead bird around his neck so there is the impression that the “we” is most likely a “they” (109). The only time the Mariner appears to identify with the rest of the crew is when they are all being tormented “in dreams” of “the spirit that plagued” them and when “every tongue” was “withered at the root” and the entire crew is made silent as if they “had been choked with soot,” and later when the dead crewmen are reanimated he says “We were a ghastly crew” (131-2; 135-8). Of course, the Mariner suffers from the guilt of killing the bird and then of alerting the crew to the approach of the skeleton ship, and possibly drawing the ship’s attention with his cries, but this happens during the course of the story. It does not explain his separation from the crew or his persecution, at least in his own mind, by the storm and ice prior to his killing the bird. There is some underlying guilt that appears to taint the Mariner and his interaction with the rest of the crew from the very beginning of the poem. The Mariner’s inherent guilt becomes more pronounced when he is “won” by Life-in-Death and left alone to watch his crewmates die one-by one. He tells the wedding guest “they all dead did lie: / And a thousand thousand slimy things / Lived on; and so did I” (237-9). In this passage, the Mariner exposes that, in his mind, he is one of the “slimy things.” The Mariner alone is not worthy of having his soul released from his body; “Seven days, seven night, I saw the curse, / And yet I could not die” (261-62). Even after the Mariner blesses the water snakes and the crew animates to return him to England, he is unable to find connection with the men who rescue him.
Of the three men who come to his rescue, the Mariner is most intent on the Hermit, and this is the first time in the course of the story that the Mariner himself appears to connect his guilt with the death of the albatross. Strangely, even though he has worked with the angelic spirits that reanimate the crew’s body to get back to his home, he insists that it is the Hermit who can “shrieve” his soul and “wash away / The Albatross’s blood” (512-13). The Mariner never considers that he must have been forgiven already for the albatross to fall from his neck and for the band of angelic spirits to ensure his return to his homeland. The Mariner is looking for an earthly connection, a witness to ameliorate the trauma. Faflak points out that the Hermit “is the first subject presumed to understand the Mariner’s traumatic experience by recognizing in his psychosomatic presence the history of his suffering” (139). The Pilot and the Pilot’s boy are not able to see the Mariner as a person at all, hence the Pilot’s “fit” and the boy’s descent into madness (Rime 561, 564-65). The Hermit asks “What manner of man art thou?” (577). A question that Faflak believes has the potential to “unlock the meaning of the Mariner’s life, thereby distilling his past to its essential paradox: that identity is based in a traumatic or ‘ghastly’ lack of identity” (139). However by attempting to conduct “the Mariner to this self-knowledge: he addresses the Mariner’s trauma before he sees in the patient a willingness to remember its catastrophic effects” (139). Therefore, although the Hermit is the first to hear the tale of the Mariner, it is a “forced” telling and does not occur within a relationship that would allow the Mariner to heal—it is neither sympathetic nor empathetic. The initial retelling just burns the trauma deeper into the Mariner’s psyche because it was “wrenched” from him “With a woful agony” (Rime 578-79). The Hermit has not taken the time to establish a personal connection with the Mariner. As Faflak
argues, the encounter devolves into a primal scene and turns “psychoanalysis into trauma, as if [the poem is] unsure of what to do with [its] own psychoanalytical content” (134). Ironically, I believe it may be the fact that the Hermit is someone who is also living on the outside of humanity—albeit separated by his holiness—that makes the Mariner believe that the Hermit can “shrieve” him of his guilt (Rime 512). As an outsider, the Mariner would look for someone who could understand that Otherness in hope for a lasting connection. Instead, his encounter with the Hermit turns into a traumatic flashback.

The Mariner’s insistence that the blood of the albatross is responsible for his situation rings hollow. Paul Manguson argues that by “the standards of the waking world, the mariner’s crime was not a serious one; yet he retains a deep sense of imperfectly understood guilt” (71). This is not a simple tale of crime and punishment. If it were, the story should climax when the Mariner blesses the “water-snakes” even though he is “unaware,” for it is at that moment the albatross falls from his neck and his connection to God is restored, as noted above (273, 285). The Mariner himself says that it was at that “selfsame moment I could pray” (288). The soft celestial voice agrees: “The man had penance done” (408). Free of the burden of the albatross’ murder, the story should end with the angelic spirits returning the Mariner to his “own countree” (467). But this is not the case; the celestial voice actually says “The man hath penance done, / And penance more will do” (408-9). This underscores the notion that the poem is more concerned with survivor’s guilt than the actual guilt or innocence of the Mariner. Weissman argues that the punishment does not “fit the crime” because “Coleridge intuitively knew a great deal about survivor guilt and depicted it with great accuracy and
great artistry,” and even “though he did not fully fathom its sources, he knew what he was talking about” because Coleridge himself suffered from survivor’s guilt (129).

Leadbetter agrees, saying: “Like Coleridge, in his own self image, the mariner has become a transgressor without being evil” (182). Manguson also believes that the poem cannot be contained in a crime and punishment trope. He argues that Coleridge “knew that the common condition of mankind, the disposition to commit evil acts could be represented by a man’s habitual actions, but its ultimate origin could not be represented by one act such as the eating of an apple or the killing of a bird” (59). He believes: “The mariner’s guilt lies in his inability to organize the mind and the sensations that are presented to it” and that “something has gone amiss with the soul of the mariner, he has been unable to integrate his faculties and establish a self” (70, 81). In other words, the Mariner is already unable to integrate his emotions and experiences before he kills the bird and experiences the trauma of surviving his crewmates. Manguson explains, “given the mariner’s delirium, it would seem that when one forsakes the familiar world for the freely associating and uncontrolled imagination, nightmare is the unavoidable result” (60). This is the reason that the Mariner turns the storm and the ice—forces “that had to be endured by all mariners as a matter of course” as Manguson points out—into forces of personal persecution (58). Leadbetter attributes “[m]uch of the poem’s imaginative charge” to the tension in the poem “between experience and explanation” (164). The world the Mariner inhabits is as unfathomable to him as it is to the reader.

Another characteristic noted by critics is that the supernatural acts as a vehicle to explore the psychological within the poem. Manguson believes that Coleridge’s “interest was not in the supernatural itself but in the mental aberrations of a person who thought
that the supernatural was a reality independent of his own mind” (50). Weissman explains that “[a]lthough the machinery of the poem is supernatural, there is nothing psychologically improbable in the story” (129). The emotion that allows this is fear—the wedding guest’s fear and the Mariner’s fear. The wedding guest’s fear appears to grow throughout the poem. I believe that the Mariner manages to transfer a portion of his fear to the guest. At first, the guest fears the Mariner’s appearance; he is afraid of the “long grey beard and glittering eye,” the “skinny hand,” and the look on the Mariner’s face when he tells of shooting the albatross (3, 9, 81). By the end of the poem, however, the wedding guest is irreparably changed. He turns “from the bridegroom’s door” and “like one that hath been stunned” and who has lost his senses he walks away (621-23). The wedding guest receives the Mariner’s story like a physical blow that overwhelms his faculties. The narrator tells readers that some of the change is permanent because “A sadder and a wiser man, / He rose the morrow morn” (624-25). This physical and mental description is at odds with the Mariner’s parting lines to the wedding guest:

He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all. (612-17)

This is hardly a life-altering point of view for the end of the eighteenth century so it is difficult to believe that this is the message that makes the wedding guest sadder and wiser. The answer, if there is an answer, must lie with the actual meeting and interaction
with the Mariner. There is of course, the possibility that the Mariner sees something within the wedding guest, as he does with the Hermit, that makes him have a traumatic flashback. The wedding guest is one of three in what is ostensibly a group of guests at the beginning of the poem so perhaps there is something within the man that keeps him somewhat distanced from the others in his group. But again, if the lesson the Mariner is attempting to pass on is one of connection, it fails because once free, the man returns home alone choosing not to rejoin his fellow guests at the wedding. Anne E. Fernald calls Coleridge “a great anatomist of loneliness;” ultimately, loneliness is the fate of both the wedding guest and the Mariner so perhaps loneliness is the Mariner’s message (48). Man strives for connection but is sidetracked by fears and therefore will always be lonely. After all, before his final advice about love, the Mariner tells the wedding guest that “To walk together to the Kirk / With a goodly company” is “sweeter than the marriage-feast” (601-4). If so, this would seem to be a message pulled straight from Coleridge’s own life, but like so many other suggestions, it too seems to be missing something to gain complete closure. Again, the difference between the experience of the wedding guest and the explanation of the Mariner and the narrator are not congruent.

The tangible aura of fear in the poem is another commonly noted feature. Manguson argues that in the poem, “[f]ear, as the associating principle, gradually emerges in the mariner’s consciousness until at the moment of his seeing the woman, he recognizes that fear is destroying him” and that “the will is overwhelmed by the strong currents of fear” (61, 69). Ultimately, Manguson believes that it is the “loss of the will, along with the loss of external support,” which “destroys all sense of [the Mariner’s] personal identity” (69). While I agree with most of Manguson’s reading, I must disagree
with his opinion that the Mariner recognizes that his fear is destroying him. The Mariner is not psychologically capable of that identification; in addition, the Mariner never conquers that fear—or even attempts to conquer it. More importantly, the Mariner’s fear helps drive his compulsion to tell his tale to strangers on the street, and it is his fear that keeps him from integrating his trauma into his own self-narrative.

In many ways, the Mariner’s experience on the ship is a type of traumatic captivity. He has lost all control of his surroundings and his future. All that he can do is maintain his position on the ship and survive the events that occur. Remember that Herman explains people “in captivity become adept practitioners of the arts of altered consciousness. Through the practice of dissociation, voluntary thought suppression, minimization, and sometimes outright denial, they learn to alter an unbearable reality” (87). Manguson notes that the “[M]ariner seems not to comprehend what happens to him, and the spectral and angelic visions confuse him” (52). This may be a sign that the Mariner is creating a fantasy of the skeleton ship, the voices, and the angelic band to explain his experience. Of course, that does not satisfactorily explain how the ship returns to the harbor with the Mariner aboard. After all, Manguson notes that Coleridge, as the poet, “did understand what happened to the mariner, and after 1800, as his knowledge of the nightmare increased, he was better able to render an accurate picture of that state” (52). Could it be that the whole experience was created out of fears in the Mariner’s own subconscious and never actually happened? Richard Matlak notes that “[t]extual evidence at important points fails to show that anyone but the Mariner sees the ship or its weird crew of two” and asks if this is indeed a nightmare or hallucination, “how much more of the tale is hallucinatory?” (96-97). This theory may also help
explain why the Mariner does not appear to have any interpersonal relationships on the
ship. As noted in Coleridge’s notebook entries, Manguson argues: “Even before the
writing of the first text of the poem, nightmares and various degrees of mental
derangement fascinated him” (54). The nightmare theory would explain the heavy dose
of fear in the poem and the reason that most rational explanations of the poem’s theme
are not able to carry through to the end and incorporate both the text and the gloss. It
would also explain the strange flow of images, sea, storm, ice, birds, guilt, heat, thirst,
suffocation, rot, fire, skeletons, terror, isolation from man and God, snakes, “gentle
sleep,” rain, angelic spirits, incorporeal voices, the sinking of the ship, and the survival of
the Mariner. Matlak believes that one must conclude “that [the Mariner] makes narrative
out of fact and private fiction to account consecutively for poignantly meaningless,
unrelated events” (97). The text of the poem does support this view because, like
Coleridge’s nightmare where he was chased by the prostitutes, there really is not a logical
order to the images or the sensations that the poem produces; yet they flow together
seamlessly, and the Mariner does not appear surprised by any of the occurrences. In
*Coleridge and the Psychology of Romanticism*, David Vallins also recognizes this trait.
He writes: “Coleridge often highlights the ways in which his thought-processes not only
give verbal and logical expression to non-rational aspects of consciousness, but
themselves influence his emotions in a mutually determining cycle” (12). Therefore, the
Mariner’s verbal expression of his tale causes fear in both the wedding guest and
himself—the reality/supernatural nature of the tale is not what is important.

Ultimately, most critics, like Weissman, believe that “Rime of the Ancient
Mariner” allowed Coleridge to achieve “a certain degree of mastery over the powerful
feelings that haunted him periodically,” which may have been one of the reasons he kept
returning to the poem and revising it between the original 1797 poem and the 1834
version used in this study (129). Of Coleridge’s three supernatural poems, it is easiest to
find the autobiographical parallels between Coleridge’s early traumas, his sense of
isolation, his unsuccessful grieving for his father, and the trauma he suffered at Christ’s
Hospital in the Mariner’s story. However, one must remember that Coleridge and the
Mariner are not the same. Even though both men are trauma survivors who have not
been able to integrate their experiences into their self-narrative and are, therefore,
haunted by the repetitive intrusion of those memories, Coleridge allows the Mariner the
freedom of telling about his experiences, a freedom he never allowed himself. In many
ways, the Mariner’s convoluted, nightmarish tale is another acknowledgement that
Coleridge, also like the Mariner, suffered from a lack of a cohesive self.

If one thinks back to Coleridge’s notebook entry where he wrote “I dread to tell
my whole & true case it seems to make a substantial reality/ I want it to remain a thought
in which I may be deceived whole [?wholly],” the poem does appear to be a transference
of some of Coleridge’s trauma, guilt, and anxiety into the story of the Mariner (CN2,
3045 & n). I believe that the poem is a tale of survivor’s guilt, but it is also more. The
poem may be a type of encoded psychological rehearsal of how others might perceive
Coleridge’s own traumatic testimony. After all, looking at how Coleridge’s treatment by
his mother and Bowyer have been reduced to “mythmaking” or “normal circumstances”
by modern biographers, how could Coleridge have expected his contemporaries to
understand the trauma the events of his childhood caused. As I will repeat throughout
this work, when reading traumatic experiences, one must believe that the trauma, as
represented by the individual, occurred. Whether or not I believe such an event could or should be traumatic is not important. It is only important that Coleridge himself found the events traumatic.

The depth of trauma that Coleridge suffered as a child is evident in more than just his writing. It is telling, I believe, that Coleridge’s friends allowed him to publicly distort his history in this manner, especially those who witnessed his childhood such as Charles Lamb. They seemed to understand that Coleridge needed to keep a strong barrier between himself and his overwhelming trauma as long as he could in order to remain functional. This is why there were not personal attacks on his published memories of his childhood and Bowyer, just some gentle nudges from those like Lamb who knew the truth. Sadly, in allowing Coleridge to continue his fiction, they helped contribute to his nightmares and personal instability. I believe that Coleridge’s poetic imagery, especially when dealing with fearful or nightmarish subjects, was and is so affecting to readers because on some level, they recognize the reality of the pain behind the images—images generated in a traumatic childhood that would make a fitting story for future novelists such as Charles Dickens. It is perhaps Coleridge’s amazing mental capacity, his thirst for knowledge, and his creative ability to generate metaphors for his trauma that kept him from fully succumbing to his un-integrated trauma and descending into complete madness. At the same time, however, those traumatic experiences may have been the key to unlocking his immense creativity. Of course grief and loss affect adults as well, and in the next chapter will explore at how William Godwin’s traumatic childhood affected his grieving process and helped to shape his memoirs of his first wife, Mary Wollstonecraft.
Chapter Two

Writing Through Grief Publicly and Privately: William Godwin’s Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman as Scriptotherapy

For more than a century, scholars have been intrigued and puzzled by William Godwin’s memoir of his first wife, Mary Wollstonecraft. The book’s tone changes from loving, to distant, to critical depending on the part of Wollstonecraft’s life Godwin is discussing. Godwin also chose to present material that destroyed what little remained of Wollstonecraft’s personal reputation, totally destroyed her professional reputation, and made it impossible for her children and friends to escape scandal. These troubling details have shaped persistent questions that fascinate scholars to this day. What exactly is the genre of the work itself? Is it biography, autobiography, or some hybrid of both? Why did Godwin write these Memoirs? Did Godwin really believe that society would accept the shocking details he published about Wollstonecraft? No matter the stance one takes when reading Memoirs, the question “why” keeps surfacing. While these questions never will be answered authoritatively, this chapter will examine the Memoirs as scriptotherapy that Godwin may have used to help work through grief and will consider how trauma may have shaped Godwin’s authorial intent.

For decades, scholars have been attempting either to force Godwin’s Memoirs into a genre or to combine genres in order to make a closer fit. Scholars understand that Memoirs was begun immediately after the death of Wollstonecraft, when Godwin had immersed himself in Wollstonecraft’s study with her writings and her portrait, but few appear to have stopped to consider that the nature of Godwin’s grief may have been
primarily responsible for the form the Memoirs eventually attained. Ildinko Csengio alone appears to recognize that “Godwin's case probes the meeting points of mourning and melancholia as they take place in writing and find expression in language” (494). Angela Monsam takes the more common route when she points out that, “[i]n form and function, Memoirs reads like late-eighteenth-century dissection reports, which were also titled Memoirs” (112). Mitzi Myers argues that although Godwin states in the Memoirs that the facts were primarily “taken from the mouth of the person to whom they relate,” Godwin’s interpretation of those facts “is very much a part of Godwin’s intellectual—and emotional—autobiography;” she does note, though, that the work began as a type of “self-therapy (Memoirs 43-44; Meyers 300, 307). Tilottama Rajan believes that Godwin’s “editing of Wollstonecraft is his attempt to write the revolutionary subject into history” or “historiography that can be read with and through his other [thought] experiments” (512). Janet M. Todd and Amy Rambow read the Memoirs as straight biography with unintended consequences as does William St Clair; however, he believes it was the first step towards modern biographies (Todd 722; Rambow 25; St Clair 183). Why does the scholarship acknowledge the grief involved in Godwin’s motivation but move on towards a different genre rather than considering Memoirs as primarily scriptotherapy? Perhaps it is the detached tone of the work. As Monsam points out, the work is primarily clinical and distant (111). Godwin saved his grief, as most modern readers would recognize it, for his letters. However, that does not change the fact that Memoirs was written in a time of intense grief and loss. I believe that Godwin used Memoirs as an early form of scriptotherapy, a way to write through and work through the trauma of his loss, and that is why scholars are perplexed by its distance and tone.
I use the term “scriptotherapy” rather than “life-writing” in this examination because the work was composed as both a work of grief and a memorial to Wollstonecraft. *Memoirs* contains too many of Godwin’s own views and digressions to be a pure biography but not enough of Godwin himself to be considered autobiography or life-writing, and the text stays centered on the linear narrative of Wollstonecraft’s life. However, Godwin’s work does have many similarities to Mary Shelley’s *Journal of Sorrow*, written during the first three years after Percy Bysshe Shelley’s sudden death, and declared to be scriptotherapy by its author who wrote: “White paper—wilt thou be my confidant? I will trust thee fully, for none shall see what I write” (*Journal* 429). Godwin’s version of scriptotherapy is very different from that his daughter’s for several reasons. Godwin’s work was always meant for public consumption and that purpose was always at the forefront during composition. Shelley’s work by comparison was initially meant to be a private form of scriptotherapy to help work through her grief; however, because Shelley began planning to elevate her spouse’s reputation almost immediately, she may have kept the idea that her *Journal* might one day become public in the back of her mind. Godwin’s and Shelley’s personalities were similar in many ways—at least in their public personas. However, Shelley allowed her private self more freedom in her *Journal* than Godwin allowed himself in either letters or journals. Godwin claimed to be a stoic, and most of his critics have taken him at his word, yet few have attempted to understand why Godwin clung to his tenets of stoicism when they were so destructive to his personal life. I believe that what Godwin considered conscious stoicism was, in fact, a combination of conscious and unconscious dissociation from his emotions. In order to
understand why Godwin felt the need to be in such firm control of his emotions, one must pause to delve a little more closely into Godwin’s psyche.

**Godwin’s Emotional Limitations**

In order to understand Godwin’s adult psyche, one must step back and look at his parents, John and Ann Godwin, and at his childhood. Godwin himself describes his parents in a forty-four-page autobiographical fragment detailing his family history and his childhood. Godwin describes his father as a very particular man who did not find the young Godwin to his liking: “My father, at the time I was most capable of noticing his habits, was extremely nice in his apparel, and delicate in his food. He spent much of his time on horseback ” in order to visit his parishioners (Fragment 9). Godwin continues: “He was attached to the intercourses of society, yet of the most unvaried temperance. He was extremely affectionate, yet at least to me, who was perhaps never his favourite, his rebukes had a painful tone of ill humour and asperity” (9). Later in the fragment, Godwin returns to the subject: “The temper of my father however had some mixture of the acrid and corrosive” (21). It is clear from this description that Godwin remembers his father as someone who was more interested in and attached to himself and his flock than his son. Godwin recounts how his father enjoyed a epicurean diet made solely for him; Godwin recalls: “He had also always white bread, the rest of the family living, like the majority of country people” only had brown bread (Fragment 27-28). It is particularly interesting that Godwin felt that his father was vain in his dress and exacting in his diet, as the adult
Godwin was known for his plain fashion and at various times refused to eat meat—although he did not expect his family and guests to abstain (St Clair 261). Godwin’s literary portrait of his mother is more sympathetic; biographer Charles Kegan Paul says that “[t]he notice of his mother is more favourable, and, as will appear from letters which are extant, not other than deserved” (6). Godwin explains: “My mother so long as her husband lived, was the qualifier and moderator of his austerities. Some of the villagers were impertinent enough to allege that she was too gay in her style of decorating her person” but “[s]he was a most obliging, submissive, and dutiful wife” (Fragment 10).iv Godwin qualifies this picture with the statement: “I speak here of her character during the life of my father. After his death it became considerably changed. She surrendered herself to the visionary hopes and tormenting fears of the methodistical sect, and her ordinary economy became teasingly parsimonious” (reprinted in Kegan Paul 7). To keep Godwin’s final remarks in perspective, one should remember that Godwin was only fifteen when his father died. While few children experienced idyllic childhoods in the eighteenth century, Godwin’s experiences were particularly suited to producing a child dissociated from his emotions.

Godwin’s first trauma was commensurate with his birth. As William St Clair points out: “In Wisbech in the remote Cambridgeshire Fens, where William Godwin was born on 3 March 1756, the mortality rate matched the worst in England. Four [of Godwin’s] brothers and sisters already lay in the chapel burial ground in Deadman’s Lane” (1). Godwin was immediately sent away from his family to be nursed by a woman his parents hired because a “medical decree of some sort had decided that my mother was not to suckle her children,” and he did not return home until the age of two (Fragment
10). Therefore, the normal period of infant bonding between Godwin and his mother never occurred. In addition, at the age of two he was torn from his temporary home and the individuals with whom he did bond to be returned to his parents as a sickly child. His parents promptly turned Godwin over to the care of his spinster aunt to whom Godwin quickly attached himself. The adult Godwin writes: “There is nothing that the human heart more inheritably seeks that an object to which to attach itself” and the young Godwin’s heart chose his aunt, Mrs. Southern (11). As an adult, St Clair believes Godwin “was inclined to blame his parents for worsening their children’s chances” for survival by this “humiliating neglect” as St Clair words it (1). There may be some truth to Godwin’s claims as, of the thirteen children born to his parents, “only six survived into adult life and only five into middle age” and one brother drowned in the horse pond at the age of two (1). However, St Clair believes that Godwin’s mother had no other choice than to send the babies away to live with a wet nurse because Godwin’s father “took in paying pupils and the cottage was already overcrowded” and because Godwin’s mother “was so preoccupied with pregnancy that she had no strength for her babies,” which may be how St Clair interpreted the medical decree Godwin mentions (1). Some of Godwin’s resentment may stem from the fact that Godwin’s mother did nurse the children who were born after Godwin, for he writes, “[t]hose younger than myself were nourished without a wet nurse, & all did well” (Fragment 10). Whatever the reason, the early separation clearly took its toll on Godwin’s young psyche, and the adult Godwin commented: “It will be readily inferred that the persons about me were less solicitous for the health of my body than the health of my soul” (13).
The concern for Godwin’s soul at the cost of his physical and mental wellness is apparent in two other anecdotes from his childhood. The first is involves what was considered appropriate reading material for dissenting children: James Janeway’s book *A Token for Children, being an Exact account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of several young children*. St Clair’s excellent summary of the contents shows that this was hardly a peaceful, comforting, bedtime tale; it was “a series of stories of children who attained grace by conforming to God’s will and dying, usually of cancers and consumptions, at ages ranging from five to twelve” (4). St Clair continues, “Janeway’s book was the main comfort offered to terrified dissenting children as they faced illness and death” (5). Janeway’s book had a profound effect on young Godwin, as he recalled later in life: “Their premature eminence suited to my own age and situation, strongly excited my emulation. I felt as if I were willing to die with them, if I could with equal success engage the admiration of my friends and mankind” (*Fragment* 12). Any cheerful, boyish exuberance appears to have been discouraged by Godwin’s father, who was “puritanically strict” (Kegan Paul 9). Godwin recalled one such instance: “One Sunday, as I walked in the garden, I happened to take the cat in my arms. My father saw me, and seriously reproved my levity, remarking that on the Lord’s-day he was ashamed to observe me demeaning myself with such profaneness” (*Fragment* 19). In fact, Godwin claims that his father did not want him to become a minister saying:

my resolution was constant of devoting myself to the clerical profession. To this my father strongly opposed himself. I was never his favourite. He was never so frank in communication with me as with my elder brothers, particularly the second. And I believe he was seriously impressed with the
notion that there was a sort of pride and unsubmittingness of spirit in me, incompatible with the humility of the gospel. (*Fragment 33*)

Note the feeling of neglect and disapproval that permeates Godwin’s tale. He repeats for the second time that he was not his father’s favorite child, implying that he was possibly the least favorite. Godwin wrote that only the intercession of his beloved aunt caused his father to change his mind and allow Godwin to study for the church. Sadly, Godwin’s time away from home in preparation for college would become one of the most horrifying episodes of his young life as he makes plain: “While I was thus eager to carry my point, I little dreamed how many sorrows I was the agent immediately to bring upon myself” (33).

Godwin was sent away to board and study with Samuel Newton in preparation for the ministry; Godwin was Newton’s only pupil and, therefore, Newton’s focus. Godwin’s description of Newton is particularly interesting for its emphasis on coarseness. Godwin wrote: “Mr. Newton was the most wretched of pedants, & was of a cold character;” he wore “a wig miraculously voluminous” and “was strongly marked with the smallpox;” and his “person was uncommonly strong and muscular, his visage brown” (*sic*, 33). When Godwin wrote this description in 1800, thirty-three years after meeting Newton, he remembered Newton’s voice as “uncommonly dissonant” and that Newton “measured out his words with inflexible gravity.” (33). Newton often called Godwin, equally, “a clever boy and a fool,” which confused the young Godwin because “they had no source, to my knowledge, but the pleasure he experienced in the feeling of supremacy. He was uniformly anxious to teach humility, though he felt no vocation to the practice of it” (*Fragment* unnumbered page inserted between pages 34 and 35). Most important is
Godwin’s later speculation on Newton because it helps modern readers gauge the fear that Newton inspired in young Godwin and marks the event as a traumatic period in Godwin’s life: “It would be a curious speculation, to draw a comparison between this sort of man, and one of the early Roman emperors, Caligula or Nero. They had probably a morbid sensibility that, from the peculiarity of their habits of stimulation, led them, if I may so express myself, to take a refined delight in the contemplation of cruelty and torture” (Fragment 35). Godwin then compared Newton to a butcher who “had left off trade, but would with transport travel fifty miles for the pleasure of felling an ox” (35). These are condemning statements. First Godwin compares Newton to the two Roman rulers most known for their depravity and cruelty and then he claims that Newton would go out of his way to perform a deed just for the pleasure of being cruel. In fact, Godwin repeats this sentiment on the next page in reference to Newton’s wife saying, “[s]he would never, like Newton, put herself out of her way for the delight of giving any one pain” (36). This repetition of Newton’s character removes any possibility that Godwin’s earlier comparison between Newton and the butcher could be misunderstood; Godwin, in essence, is telling his future readers that Newton was a sadist. It is important to remember that these biographical statements were drafted with the intention to publish them so we must assume that Godwin’s picture of Newton that presented was the one he wanted the public to read.

Interestingly, St Clair and Kegan Paul differ in their opinions of how Newton treated Godwin during the next three years. St Clair accepts Godwin’s adult version of how poorly he was treated and implies that the abuse may have been one of the reasons Godwin was sent to Newton, saying “Godwin’s father believed that a drastic remedy was
needed to crush his son’s arrogance—as he saw it—and instill a proper sense of religious humility,” and accordingly “[a]t Newton’s house Godwin was conscientiously whipped for any suspicion of deviationism” (7). Kegan Paul takes a more moderate point of view probably in keeping with the late Victorian time period in which he wrote. Kegan Paul presents Godwin’s tales of Newton as a late life change of opinion, saying: “Of this man he gives a most unpleasant picture, physically and intellectually. But this is evidently the impression of his riper manhood, not of his childhood. For at the time Newton had a great influence over him, and of a kind scarcely possible but where sympathy exists” (10). Instead Kegan Paul believes “[i]t is probable that [Godwin] only grew to detest Newton when he grew to detest Newton’s creed” (10). In addition, Kegan Paul misreads Godwin’s description of Newton’s discussion of the rod in the fragment: “After the fashion of those days, Newton speedily proceeded to birch his self-complacent pupil, prefacing the application of the rod by a long exhortation, full of facetious metaphor” (11). This is not what Godwin wrote. Godwin particularly notes that the facetious metaphors were about the “rod” itself, as will be seen below.

I believe Kegan Paul based most of his reading of Godwin’s fragment as a late life change on several sentences that are written on an unnumbered page in the fragment; they read:

Newton was certainly my friend. His sentiments towards me were singular. He always treated me as self-conceited & arrogant: yet he had a high opinion of my talents. He repeatedly consulted me while his pupil upon the construction of a disputed text, & generally at such times found occasion to praise my sagacity. At the age of two-or-three & twenty, he
told me respecting a young preacher, who was indeed a blockhead, that he was not worthy to carry a satchel of books after me. His loathsome severities were entirely independent of his judgment concerning me.

(Fragment unnumbered page inserted between pages 34 and 35)

Where Kegan Paul takes this paragraph on the strength of the first sentence, it is important to note that the paragraph has a split personality. Godwin’s positive notes about Newton, such as Newton consulting and praising Godwin, are almost equally balanced by a negative, such as Newton treating Godwin as conceited and arrogant. It is also important to note that this paragraph ends with the sentences quoted above where Godwin explained that Newton took pleasure in feelings of supremacy and that while Newton wanted to teach humility, he did not feel the need to practice it. Despite the initial positive sentence, Godwin ends the paragraph with two very strongly negative character traits that largely negate the first sentence. The next evidence Kegan Paul gives for Godwin’s late-life change in opinion is the evidence that Godwin voluntarily returned to Newton after some months at home. Kegan Paul writes, “[i]t is plain therefore, that his dislike of his tutor could not have been great” (12). However, there is a more psychologically probable explanation for Godwin’s return to Newton if one looks at Newton as an abusive adult.

The dichotomy evident in Godwin’s descriptions of Newton and his willingness to return to the Newton may seem irregular, but they are actually in keeping with the behavioral norm of an abused child. Judith Herman explains: “Even more than adults, children who develop in the climate of domination develop pathological attachments to those who abuse and neglect them, attachments that they will strive to maintain even at
the sacrifice of their own welfare, their own reality, or their lives” (98). In this case, it is appropriate to consider Godwin’s situation in the Newton household as a family environment and a situation of traumatic captivity, as discussed in the previous chapter, because Godwin lived with the Newton family while studying with Newton. In fact Godwin compared Newton’s wife to “an animated statue of ice,” a woman who only could be motivated to take interest in something by “fire & brimstone,” making it clear that she would not involve herself in Newton’s affairs to protect a child (Fragment 36). It is striking how many of the details Godwin described can be attributed to an abusive adult. First is Godwin’s statement that he never knew if he was going to be praised as a “clever boy” or called a fool. Even the adult Godwin cannot find any pattern that dictated when he was praised and when he was berated, and he rightly attributes the capricious behavior to Newton’s need for supremacy. Herman notes that in an abusive environment, “the exercise of parental power is arbitrary, capricious, and absolute. Rules are erratic, inconsistent, or patently unfair. Survivors frequently recall that what frightened them most was the unpredictable nature of violence” (98). As an adult, Godwin recognized the reason behind the irregularity of Newton’s behavior, but as a child, he was left off balance. Godwin wrote: “It will probably be acknowledged that I could scarcely have been placed more unfavourably for the cultivation of genius or sentiment, than with this family” (Fragment 36). Godwin recalled that Newton’s “most frequent topic of conversation when he addressed himself to me, was the rod, for which he had a variety of ingenious and facetious metaphors”—this is the sentence Kegan Paul misreads (Fragment 36). The statement actually shows that when Newton was not beating Godwin, he was telling Godwin about his next beating and finding ways to work
the threat of violence into conversations, which would keep Godwin continually in a state of emotional hyperarousal. Godwin recalls a story that Newton dwelt upon “with particular glee” (37). The story was of another of Newton’s students who was placed under his care for merely a week, & was foolishly persuaded that no such disgraceful accident could possibly happen to him in this interim. Newton seized the first plausible occasion to convince him of his mistake, & he commented with peculiar triumph upon the astonishment & anguish that the boy discovered. In this case however he was it seems contented with words, & did not proceed to sensible demonstration. (Fragment 37)

It is true that Godwin never describes a beating from Newton in detail, if he could even access those memories, but he leaves strong clues in his memoirs including writing about the “corporeal sufferings [Newton] occasionally inflicted” and saying that he “was under the control of a despot” (38, 43). One of the most intriguing statements of abuse is when Godwin wrote that he was shocked because it “had never occurred” to him that his “person” could “suffer such ignomious violation,” which I believe was in reference to his sense of self as well as the physical beatings, but it is certainly very strong and very peculiar wording and does raise the specter of sexual abuse (37). In addition, Godwin writes that he felt the need to avoid the “ignominy and conscious disgrace” of letting anyone know about his situation (37). Therefore, Godwin kept the secret “[f]or more than twenty years,” keeping his secret safe by never reporting his circumstances and by seeking “to avoid the subject” (37). In my opinion, the best evidence of the trauma which that period of Godwin’s life represented is that he devoted nearly ten full pages to the
three years he spent with Newton, nearly twenty-five percent of the fragment devoted to his first fifteen years.

The Newton pages also contain Godwin’s description, during his bout with smallpox, of his escape into dissociation, a state in which traumatized individuals disconnect, or dissociate, from their surroundings and emotions in order to protect themselves. Godwin describes his determination not to tell anyone he was ill: “the character and manners of Newton, and my determination not to complain of them, produced in me a detachment from life” and produced “a willingness to die of the distemper under which I laboured” (Fragment 37-38). Kegan Paul notes the statement but attributes the detachment to Godwin’s feverish state. However, the very next sentence continues the discussion of dissociation. Godwin directly attributes this period of his life to the “habit” he was forming “of shutting up my reflections in my own bosom, without finding in any one the solace of frankness & confidence, has, no doubt, had a material influence upon the events of my life” (38). This echoes Herman’s explanation, nearly two hundred years later, that “the personality formed in an environment of coercive control is not well adapted to adult life” (110). Dissociation is effective in the short term and provides immediate relief to the traumatized individual, but when dissociation under stress becomes a habit, it becomes problematic, as Herman notes: “The extensive recourse to dissociative defenses may end up aggravating the abused child’s dysphoric emotional state, for the dissociative process sometimes goes too far. Instead of producing a protective feeling of detachment, it may lead to a sense of complete disconnection from others” (108). Godwin actually first describes his ability to dissociate much earlier, around the age of five. Godwin first says that he suffered from “ringing in the ears” and
“melancholy & ennui” (Fragment 13). He then describes “[a]nother sensation that [he] often felt”, but one that he had never, in 1800, seen described (13-14). Godwin describes this feeling as a “gradual swelling of the heart, till it seemed ready to burst, accompanied with a feeling that every thing I that touched the body—clothes for example, was a hard impenetrable substance” (Fragment 13). Godwin is describing himself at the age of five having what sounds like a panic attack at the very least, but it can also be attributed to a disconnection between his mental/emotional life and his physical being.

If we consider the full impact of Godwin’s childhood from his point of view, it makes sense that he would depend on dissociation as a coping skill. In Godwin’s mind, he was rejected as an infant and sent to live with a wet nurse; then when he was returned to the family home at age two, more children had already displaced him. Godwin felt rejected by his father and may have felt threatened by his older siblings, as they were in charge of the two-year-old boy who drowned. Godwin recalls that at the time of his brother’s drowning, he “recollected his own situation and circumstances at the time of the accident” after describing how the older boys were distracted by their kite and only remembered that they were to watch the toddler “more than an hour” later (Fragment 14). Godwin, insecure and uncertain about his immediate family, finally finds someone to whom he can attach himself emotionally in his aunt, but she is still limited by the childrearing beliefs of her time and her own dour personality. Godwin finds some enjoyment and much needed adulation at day school but is then sent to study with Newton as a reward for his academic prowess. Newton takes an already emotionally neglected and needy child and adds, at the very least, the physical pain of abuse. Most importantly, the abuse is connected to the one thing that always gave Godwin the most
pleasure and sense of accomplishment, his mental acuity, which forever attaches the violence to Godwin’s love of learning. By attaching the abuse to Godwin’s one pleasure in life, Newton compounds the trauma of the events.

Godwin’s experiences may not be different than the experience of many other children of that era, but that is not important. What is important is that Godwin believed he was neglected and abused and that he developed the coping skills commensurate with that neglect and abuse, particularly chronic dissociation. Once Godwin began dissociating from emotionally charged events, he would have to continue that pattern because allowing himself to actually feel emotion brings danger. When Godwin does allow himself to feel, he would be opening himself to the flood of emotions that he had buried decades before. Godwin cannot choose to feel just the emotions connected to this event or that event; all of the buried negative emotions can potentially surface. Additionally, Godwin would have stopped emotionally maturing at the age he began relying upon dissociation as his foremost coping skill. Therefore, when the adult Godwin did react emotionally to an event, he did so not as an adult but as a young boy or an adolescent. The maladaptive coping skills Godwin developed play a major part in how he perceived others and how others perceived both Godwin and his writing.

Evidence for Godwin’s dissociation as an adult is apparent in his letters, particularly those written within a month of Wollstonecraft’s death. The day of Wollstonecraft’s death, Godwin wrote five letters that are still in existence. For the most part the letters are just what one would expect; Godwin wrote to close friends to tell them about Wollstonecraft’s death earlier that morning. However, the letter that he wrote to Elizabeth Inchbald stands out. Inchbald, as Godwin recounted in Memoirs, publicly cut
Wollstonecraft at the theater shortly after her marriage to Godwin. Yet, the newly bereaved Godwin took the time to write the following note to Inchbald:

My wife died at eight this morning. I always thought you used her ill, but I forgive you. You told me you did not know her. You have a thousand good & great qualities. She had a very deep-rooted admiration for you.

yours, with real honour & esteem

W Godwin (sic, GL 238)

In the flurry of death notices, why would Godwin send one to Inchbald rather than to Wollstonecraft’s sisters? And why would he write a note that sounds like a childish taunt? To paraphrase, Godwin told Inchbald, “my wife is dead and now you can never apologize for your rudeness, but she, being by far the better person, always thought the best of you anyway.” I believe that Godwin was attempting to distance himself from his grief and, in order to do so, channeled some of his anger instead, hence the note to Inchbald. The written argument between Godwin and Inchbald played out in letters over the next few weeks and gave Godwin someone on whom he could focus his anger rather than being angry with himself or Wollstonecraft. In other words, the argument gave him some distance from his immediate circumstances.

In order to be able to disconnect from his grief and to keep it from overwhelming him, Godwin asked most of those to whom he wrote to either not come see him or, if they must visit, he asks (in a letter to Thomas Holcroft) that they not “exhort or console” him (GL 237). In the letters Godwin wrote on 10 September 1797, he writes with a strange avoidance of actual emotion. He tells James Barry, “Do not think however that you could...
have been as anxious as I was” (*sic*, 236). Godwin does admit to some grief in his letter to William Nicholson, who wrote with condolences and the offer to take in Fanny, Wollstonecraft’s daughter with Gilbert Imlay. Godwin says that Nicholson’s letter gave him “all the pleasure I am at this moment capable of receiving” (239). The grief that Godwin was trying to dissociate from, however, becomes more evident in his letters over the next few days. Writing on 11 September, to an unknown addressee, Godwin shows his only written emotional response to Wollstonecraft’s death:

I am very weak. I have three or four friends about me, whom I have seen every day during this fatal period, & whom, from that sort of habit, I can bear to see. I am afraid of any stranger. There is nothing I would not do, rather than give you pain; but, I assure you, that to see you just now would be a violent effort. Judge for yourself. Either stay for a few days, or call only for a minute or two, & say nothing pointed or particular. (GL 240-41)

However, even in this, his most emotional letter, he ends by saying, “Be assured I shall do very well. I know myself, in that respect, & you ought to trust me. I do not want consolation; it is the only thing I dread” (241). Even as he admits to some emotion, Godwin is trying to pull the emotion back and get himself back under control; therefore, someone consoling him would threaten the fragile shell Godwin is attempting to build.

Godwin expressed the need to keep his shell about himself in the letter he wrote to Samuel Parr on 13 September:

I wrote several letters on the day succeeding this dreadful, incurable calamity, till I felt myself called upon by every principle of justice &
reason to lay down the pen, & write no more. The effects that
employment produced in me alarmed me. Since that time I have carefully
abstained from writing on the subject. I could not however refrain from
putting down these few lines to you; but I dare not trust myself to express
or dwell upon my feelings. (GL 243)

Godwin particularly explains that the strong emotions were so alarming that he has not
written of Wollstonecraft’s death since, which, while not particularly truthful, shows that
he is enforcing boundaries to keep from being taken over by his own emotional response.
I find the end of the letter the most convincing of Godwin’s dissociation because he
admits there that he cannot “trust” himself to “express or dwell” on his feelings—
possibly for fear of being so overwhelmed that he would experience emotional flooding
and not be able to dam up those emotions again.

The next day, 14 September, Godwin repeats these fears in a letter to Mrs. Cotton,
a friend of Wollstonecraft’s who is desperate for news; he writes that he “cannot write”
(GL 244). Godwin believes he has “half destroyed himself by writing” and that writing
“does [him] more mischief than any thing else” (244). In the next sentence, Godwin
explains that he is acting out of self-preservation, “I must preserve myself” (244).
However, Godwin provides Mrs. Cotton with a spare outline of the events surrounding
Wollstonecraft’s death and then asks her to address any further questions to Mrs.
Fenwick rather than to himself. Again, this is evidence of a purposeful effort to distance
himself from emotions he is not willing to feel or cannot process. The same behavior is
evident in his letter to Anthony Carlisle, written during Wollstonecraft’s funeral, which
Godwin did not attend.
Rather than face the emotion inherent in Wollstonecraft’s death and gain some closure from the funeral, Godwin avoids the subject entirely and instead pens a letter to Wollstonecraft’s physician in which he tells Carlisle that “I never, in the whole course of my life, met with the union of so clear & capacious an understanding, with so much goodness of heart & sweetness of manner” (GL 246). The description is not of Wollstonecraft; it is Godwin’s description of Carlisle, a description and proffer of emotional attachment that took Carlisle by surprise. Why would Godwin write a letter that reads like a love letter to Wollstonecraft’s physician during her funeral? Why write to Carlisle rather than to one of his close friends? The only answer that makes sense is that, as with the Inchbald letter, Godwin felt the need to dissociate completely from the funeral and the emotions it evoked in him. In fact Godwin tells Carlisle that his “mind is extremely sunk & languid. But I husband my thoughts and shall do very well” (GL 246). Through this conscious dissociation, Godwin explains that he has only once been “in a train of thought that gave me alarm” and that he has managed by avoiding Wollstonecraft’s books and even a book on education and child rearing because they “impressed me too forcibly with my forlorn & disabled state with respect to the two poor animals left under my protection” so Godwin “threw it aside” (246). In the next paragraph, Godwin attempts to explain why he is avoiding his memories and the emotions associated with them: “Nothing could be more soothing to my mind that to dwell in a long letter upon her virtues & accomplishments, & our mutual happiness past & in prospect. But the attractions of this subject are delusive, & I dare not trust myself with it” (GL 246). Stating that he cannot trust his emotional memories to soothe him, Godwin turns to the subject of Carlisle himself, employing language that is more
associated with a lover than an attending physician. I believe Godwin is once again intentionally displacing his emotions. The mis/displaced emotion calls into question one of the standard parts of the Godwin/Wollstonecraft legend—Godwin’s avoidance of the funeral. St Clair and many other critics have reasoned that Godwin did not attend Wollstonecraft’s funeral because of his debilitating grief. They are not incorrect, but they do mislead their readers. I believe Godwin’s grief was so overwhelming and debilitating that he could not allow himself to feel the emotions for fear of losing himself. I believe that the real reason Godwin did not attend the funeral is because by attending, Godwin would have been forced to face the reality of Wollstonecraft’s death and the flood of emotions that went along with it—in public no less. This is something that Godwin could not and would no allow himself to do.

In the weeks after Wollstonecraft’s funeral, Godwin uses another interesting tactic to suppress his emotions in his letters. Rather than describing the way he feels, he implies the emotion, often through a question, and allows his correspondents to ascribe their own emotions to him. It is actually an evolution of his response to James Barry on the day of Wollstonecraft’s death when he told Barry not to think that Barry was himself more anxious than Godwin was during Wollstonecraft’s illness (GL 236). On 4 October, Godwin asks Hugh Skeys, who was married to Wollstonecraft’s childhood friend Fanny Blood, “[i]f you & her other friends loved her, what must my sensations be, who probably knew more of her than any other person did?” (250). This is a very subtle shift that ascribes Skeys’ and all of Wollstonecraft’s friends’ emotions to Godwin and magnifies them at the same time. If all of Wollstonecraft’s friends are in mourning and feeling inconsolable, then they would believe that Godwin was doubly tortured. On 23
October, Godwin uses the same approach with Amelia Alderson and expands it further. Godwin asks Alderson if writing a letter of condolence is difficult, “how much greater must be my difficulty in answering it?” (258). Again, Godwin uses the emotion Alderson is confessing in order to mirror and to magnify the grief that he must feel, and all of this takes place without Godwin having to admit to any emotions himself. With Alderson, possibly because of their prior flirtation, Godwin continues to give her more fodder for conjecture: “I could easily let loose a whole torrent of regrets, but this would be contrary to my present ideas of propriety & right; it would be of little benefit to you, & exquisitely painful to me” (258). Godwin then tells Alderson that he enjoys “the cultivation of melancholy” although it “weakens [Godwin’s] stoicism in the ordinary occurrences of life; but it refines & and raises [his] sensibility” (258). However, immediately after admitting his enjoyment of melancholy Godwin again addresses the boundaries that he feels he must impose on his emotions saying, “in the midst of this indulgence, I must prescribe certain limits to myself” (GL 258). Godwin allows himself to be alone and to be surrounded by objects that belong to Wollstonecraft, but he does not dare “sedulously call up to my mind the whole of the evil sustained, in the manner one does in writing a letter” (GL 258). One of the reasons Godwin emphasizes letters in this statement is that he has already begun Memoirs. Godwin clearly associates the intimacy of letters with more dangerous emotions than he does biographies.

The final evidence for Godwin’s intentional cultivation of dissociation as an adult appears in a letter he wrote to John Horseman on 25 October 1797. This letter does not address Wollstonecraft at all, but it does detail the process Godwin used to dissociate from painful thoughts and situations. Godwin writes down a step-by-step process of
dissociation to encourage, Horseman, who has been suffering from depression, to use it. Godwin rationalizes his dissociation in this letter, calling it “a certain discipline of the mind,” and recommends this procedure as the best way “to restore sanity to the intellect, & consequent vigour to the animal frame” (GL 265). Godwin is correct in his observation that a “mind over matter” approach can bring some relief, but in his own life he took the process to the extreme of complete dissociation. The process, as Godwin understands it and practices it, is explained as follows:

The first thing you have to guard against, as the most pernicious error into which you can fall, is the feeling yourself flattered as something honourable & delicate, by your own misery. Do not from this or other motives, cherish & indulge painful sensations. Resolutely expel them, if possible, from your mind. Determine, vehemently & hardily, to be as happy as you can. (265)

In his advice to Horseman, Godwin offers advice that he is not fully willing to follow, specifically the part about not feeling flattered as Godwin remarks to individuals on several occasions that he loves feeling melancholy and notes in the letter above how it raises his sensibilities. However, Godwin does an excellent job of describing the process of conscious dissociation: one simply expels or ignores painful sensations and determines that one is happy. Again, in moderation, this is not harmful advice, but notice that Godwin does not set limits for Horseman. Godwin implies that all painful sensations should be expelled, which circumvents the process of natural emotional growth. Godwin expounds on this idea, telling the young man: “Cultivate cheerful impressions. Break off abruptly the thread of painful ones. Set your face, as much as possible, against a spirit of
timidity and procrastination. Endeavour to be always active, always employed” (GL 265). Finally Godwin warns Horseman: “Do not indulge in visions & phantoms of the imagination, or place your happiness in something you may perhaps never obtain, but endeavour to make it out of the materials within your reach” (266). Again, on the surface this appears to be good, if limiting, advice: act happy, do not allow painful thoughts, do not get carried away by fantasy or fears, and do not reach for the stars. Godwin, however, tended towards extremes, and in this letter, Godwin explicitly spells out how he (and by extension Horseman) can achieve the extreme of complete dissociation.

**Godwin the Narcissist**

In addition to dissociative behavior, I believe there is a strong possibility that Godwin may have suffered from what, today, could be called Narcissistic Personality Disorder. vi Certainly, most of Godwin’s biographers and critics acknowledge that Godwin was often arrogant, self-centered, and haughty. However, I believe that Godwin was a pathological narcissist. A quick look at the current diagnostic criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder illustrates how closely Godwin conforms to an individual who might be diagnosed with this disorder.

A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:
(1) has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)

(2) is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love

(3) believes that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with other special or high-status people (or institutions)

(4) requires excessive admiration

(5) has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations

(6) is interpersonally exploitative, i.e. takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends

(7) lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others

(8) is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her

(9) shows arrogant, haughty behavior or attitudes

(DSM-IV-TR 717)

Of course as the DSM-IV-TR notes, successful individuals commonly display many of these traits. The line between a trait in a successful person and a person with a personality disorder is drawn when the traits “are inflexible, maladaptive, and persisting
and cause significant functional impairment or subjective distress do they constitute Narcissistic Personality Disorder” (717). Sadly, as Memoirs and many of Godwin’s actions and letters throughout his long life show, he clearly crosses that line and continues his narcissistic behavior far past a point where it was beneficial to him or his reputation. In the modern era, only five of the criteria listed above are needed for a professional diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, and Godwin exhibits nearly all of the criteria in his letters, autobiographical fragments, and his writings. I believe that this narcissistic personality is the reason Godwin can both be so self-aware that he can notice and describe his own dissociation but yet be so blind that he cannot see how his actions affect his family and friends. Ironically, Godwin’s narcissistic personality is probably what allowed him to escape Newton’s household with an unharmed, strong sense-of-self, unlike the experience of most chronically abused and neglected children.

Evidence of Godwin’s narcissistic personality can be found throughout the autobiographical fragment detailing Godwin’s childhood. Of course because Godwin completed the autobiographical fragment in February of 1800, the sentiments and wording in the fragment are necessarily those of the adult Godwin; however, I believe there is enough evidence in the anecdotes Godwin chooses to relate to show that his narcissism developed quite early. Godwin continually emphasizes his brilliance as a child, implying that he was far more intelligent and gifted than either of his two oldest brothers, who were favored by their father. Godwin describes himself as a young boy of five “placed on a little stool” in his aunt’s room reading Pilgrim’s Progress and recalls his attempt to find the “narrow way” that Pilgrim walked in his neighborhood (Fragment 11-12). Godwin mentions that in the winter of 1761, as a five year old, he wrote his first
poem of eight lines declaring, “I will be a minister” and claims that he was “ambitious to be a poet;” Godwin argues that his mind “forbids [him] to doubt the accuracy of the tale” because the year is fixed in his mind,” (15-16). When Godwin describes his attendance at Dame School, he says “I was the woman’s favourite, & entertained an extraordinary deference & respect for her in return,” claims that by the age of eight he had memorized the entire New Testament and believes this “had undoubtedly a great share in forming my infant character” (16). By the age of eight, Godwin also says, becoming a “divine” became “the object” of his “earliest ambition” and in preparation he began preaching “extempore” sermons in the kitchen “every Sunday afternoon” and soon followed those with “written ones” (16-18). Godwin continually emphasizes his intelligence and superiority in all events—even in his pages recounting his time with Newton. Godwin says, “It was scarcely possible for an preceptor to have a pupil more penetrated with curiosity & a thirst after knowledge, than I was” when he arrived at Newton’s house (35). Godwin also describes himself possessing “a trembling sensibility” an “insatiable ambition” and an “indescribable love of approbation & esteem” (35). In one amazing sentence, Godwin compares his treatment at Newton’s hands to his treatment by his earlier, beloved teachers saying, ““the idea had something in it as abrupt, as a fall from heaven to earth” (Fragment 37). While this catalogs the shock of Newton’s abuse, it also has implications of the divine, casting Godwin as a heavenly being who has been forced to earth—a shocking comparison to make when speaking of oneself. In Godwin’s short collegiate narrative, he emphasizes his unique genius and the adoration of his fellow students: “During my academical life, and from this time forward, I was indefatigable in my search after truth; I was famous in our college for calm and impassionate discussion; I
was remarked by my fellow-collegians for the intrepidity of my opinions and the tranquil fearlessness of my temper” (*Autobiography* 42). In these statements, Godwin not only sets himself apart for his brilliance, he also stresses his emotional detachment as a factor in that brilliance.

However, the most incriminating anecdote falls at the end of Godwin’s longest autobiographical fragment. Even Kegan Paul remarks that the tale “is one displaying that inordinate vanity which was traceable through his life, amid much that was loveable” (15). Recounting a visit to the Sessions House as an adolescent, Godwin remembers sitting right in front of the judge and resting his elbow on the judge’s cushion. At some point in the session, Godwin recalls: “[The magistrate] laid his hand gently on my elbow and removed it. On this action I recollect having silently remarked, if his lordship knew what the lad beside him will perhaps one day become I am not sure that he would have removed my elbow” (*Fragment* 44). This is a particularly obvious reference to his narcissism, and this incident alone fulfills the five criteria that would be needed today for a Narcissistic Personality Disorder diagnosis: has a unearned grandiose sense of self-importance, preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited brilliance, believes that he is “special” and should associate with other special or high-status people, has a sense of (unearned) entitlement, shows arrogant or haughty behavior or attitudes (*DSM-IV-TR* 717).

The one characteristic that confirms Godwin most strongly as a narcissist is his lack of empathy, which Emily W. Sunstein, Anne K. Mellor, and William St Clair point out in their various studies of the Godwin and the Shelley families. Godwin’s lack of empathy towards and subsequent manipulation of his daughters will be discussed in detail
in the next chapter. At this point, it is important to note the role Godwin’s lack of empathy played in the formation of Memoirs. In preparation for writing Memoirs, Godwin corresponded with Skeys. He is particularly interested in Wollstonecraft’s time with Blood and Skeys before Blood’s death during childbirth. When Godwin tells Skeys what he intends to print in Memoirs, Skeys becomes concerned and writes asking that Godwin not include information regarding one of Blood’s employers. Godwin responds to Skeys’ valid concerns as follows:

My habits of thinking do not entirely coincide with those expressed in your letter. There is little or nothing that relates to me, that I should feel any pain in seeing published to the world. I do not think the conduct of another person can fix any discredit on me, unless that person had been so placed as to have their habits particularly under my influence, & that afterwards they acted dishonourably. You may regard my spirit of frankness in this respect, as savouring of romantic. (GL 269-70)

Godwin’s narcissism is evident in the letter but so is his lack of empathy. Godwin never considers that Skeys might have valid concerns. Because he lacks empathy, Godwin really cannot understand why Skeys is concerned at all. In fact the letter’s tone is more of a personal complaint because Godwin has already finished Memoirs and is forced by Skeys to rewrite the section on Fanny Blood. This may well be why Godwin minimized Skeys’ presence in Memoirs, naming him only once and continuing to call Fanny Blood by her first name rather than Mrs. Skeys—as he identifies all other married women. The last sentence in the paragraph quoted above is particularly interesting because Godwin calls his opinion “romantic,” implying that he is not being realistic without having to
actually having to understand that he is taking an unrealistic stance. As Rambow points out, “Godwin’s persistent inability to anticipate the consequences of the candor he so valued first claimed his attention when it recoiled on [Wollstonecraft]” (24).

**Godwin in Love**

Part of Godwin’s unwillingness to see Skeys’ point of view about his *Memoirs* stems directly from Godwin’s relationship with Wollstonecraft and the major changes it made in Godwin’s psyche. When Godwin met Wollstonecraft for the second time in January of 1796, she was an emotionally wounded thirty-seven-year-old woman who had finalized her traumatic split with Gilbert Imlay just six months earlier. Godwin, at this time, was an emotionally stunted forty-one-year-old man. Most biographers agree that Godwin had not had any serious love affairs until this time, although he did have an awkward flirtation with Amelia Alderson and an unusually close relationship with Mrs. Maria Reveley, which while emotionally charged was most likely not consummated (St Clair 151-156). St Clair believes that after the relationship with Reveley ended in 1795, at the urging of her spouse, Godwin “was only vaguely aware that, for the first time in his life, he had been touched by powerful emotions which did not easily match his understanding of his own character” (156). Godwin, “for the first time in his life,” was exposed to the positive emotions of love and happiness—a process which, I believe, prepared the emotionally scarred Godwin for his subsequent relationship with Wollstonecraft.
There has never been any doubt that Godwin was passionately in love with Wollstonecraft. What must be recognized, however, is that Godwin really did not know how to be in a relationship or how to express his emotions. One may argue that many males of Godwin’s era were under the same handicap, but Godwin’s dissociation and lack of empathy made the course of the relationship rockier than most, especially when added to Wollstonecraft’s own scarred emotions and relationship insecurities. Godwin’s letter of 13 July 1769 begins their courtship. It is an uncommonly light and flirtatious letter. Godwin warns Wollstonecraft “When I make love, it shall be in a storm, as Jupiter made love to Semele, & turned her at once into a cinder. Do not these menaces terrify you?” (GL 171). How is it that someone so dissociated could write such a light-hearted letter filled with passion? I believe that there are two reasons that this letter is so carefree: It is a letter of flirtation, much like those he wrote to Alderson, although, a little more passionate; and the letter is associated with only positive emotions. There has never been a reason for Godwin to monitor and suppress his positive emotions. Indeed, he did not seem to have many occasions for positive emotions, such as love, to surface.

It is not until Godwin and Wollstonecraft were involved in their love affair, a month later, that the problems one would expect in a relationship between two such wounded souls surfaced. On 17 August, Wollstonecraft wrote Godwin a letter that eloquently expresses her fears of being in a relationship: “My imagination is for ever betraying me into fresh misery, and I perceive that I shall be a child to the end of the chapter. You talk of roses which grow profusely in every path of life—I catch at them; but only encounter the thorns” (G&M 15). This outpouring appears to have been occasioned by some action of Godwin’s as Wollstonecraft continues in the next
paragraph: “I can only say that you appear to me to have acted injudiciously; and that full of your own feelings, little as I comprehend them, you forgot mine—or do not understand my character” (15). Wollstonecraft actually gives a very good description of how Godwin’s dissociation and narcissism affect their relationship and does not hesitate to call Godwin out for his actions. More importantly, she explains to Godwin, possibly for the first time in his life, how his actions affect her. Wollstonecraft does not couch this in coy terms; she seems to understand that Godwin needs bluntness and tells him: “I am not well—I am hurt” (15). Wollstonecraft ends the letter with the offer to break the relationship off if that is what Godwin would prefer.

I believe that Wollstonecraft already knew Godwin well enough to understand that Godwin would prefer to handle emotionally volatile topics via correspondence so that he could compose a reply in his own time and manner. Godwin’s reply confirms that: “In one point we sympathise; I had rather at this moment talk to you on paper than in any other mode” (GL 173). Godwin is much more reserved in this letter—more philosopher than lover. At the end of the letter, Godwin encourages Wollstonecraft to follow the same advice he will give Horseman the following year: “do not let [your emotions] tyrannise over you,” “[r]esolve to be happy,” “everything that interferes with [happiness] is weakness & wandering, & a woman, like you can, must, shake it off” (174). According to the extant letters, Wollstonecraft’s feelings were often hurt by Godwin’s words and actions. As most of the surviving letters written during their courtship are from Wollstonecraft, it is difficult to know how Godwin responded each time. However, Wollstonecraft seemed to understand that this was new, uncharted, and often incomprehensible territory for Godwin. Wollstonecraft responded to Godwin’s
letter with the advice to distance herself from her emotions by telling him: “My affections have been more exercised than yours, I believe” (G&M 19). Wollstonecraft is both acknowledging that she is more wounded in the relationship arena than Godwin and, at the same time, letting him know that he needs to exercise his emotions more freely. Godwin wrote another letter the same day telling Wollstonecraft that two hours after the first letter was sent he “suddenly became awake, & perceived the mistake I had made” (175). Godwin continues in the next paragraph, “Perhaps you will not believe that I could have been so destitute of understanding” (GL 175). If nothing else, Wollstonecraft stretched Godwin’s emotional range and forced him to connect with her on a deeper level.

Sadly, their relationship did not last long enough to make an apocalyptic change in Godwin. In the months after Memoirs was so poorly received, Godwin writes an “Analysis of Own Character”—almost as if he feels the need to scientifically examine where he has stepped wrong. This soul searching produces some very good insights. Godwin writes “I am bold and adventurous in opinions, not in life: it is impossible a man with my diffidence and embarrassment should be. —This, and perhaps only this, renders me often cold uninviting, unconciliating in society” and later muses “I am anxious to avoid giving pain, yet when I have undesignedly given it, I am sometimes drawn on, from the painful sensation that the having done what we did not intend occasions, to give more” and acknowledges that he has “a singular want of foresight on some occasions as to the effect what I shall say will have on the person to whom it is addressed” (55, 56, 57). He sums up his character by recording that his “two leading features” are “sensibility and insensitivity” (59). These are indeed excellent insights to Godwin’s own
lack of empathy. Unfortunately Godwin’s narcissism intervenes, and he immediately begins to find excuses for this behavior: he has a “nervous character,” but his “temper is one of the soundest and most commendable” he has ever known (57). Godwin also notes his sensitivity saying “I am subject to sensations of fainting, particularly at the sight of wounds, bodily infliction and pain,” which I believe might be related to his days with Newton, but here Godwin uses this as evidence that he is not as unfeeling as others might believe. He also begins to shift part of the blame to others: “At all times agreeable company has an omnipotent effect upon me, and raises me from the worst tone to the best” (58). This implies that if Godwin was not cheerful or talkative, then it is the fault of the individual with whom he is socializing. Godwin goes even further and in what may be his only critique of Wollstonecraft’s emotional neediness writes:

No domestic connection is fit for me, but that of a person who should habitually study my gratification and happiness—in that case I should certainly not yield the palm of affectionate attentions to my companion. In the only intimate connection of that kind I ever had, the partner of my life was too quick in [her] conceiving resentments; but they were dignified and [silent] restrained; they left no hateful and humiliating remembrances behind them; and we were as happy as is permitted to human beings.

(Analysis 58)

Note that Godwin emphasizes that his next partner will have to put Godwin’s desires and happiness ahead of her own. He also believes that Wollstonecraft got her feelings hurt too easily, but Godwin forgives her because she did not fly into a rage and say hurtful or humiliating things to him, which of course implies that this has been the case with others
Godwin has known. The “Analysis” Godwin produces is limited by his dissociation and his narcissism, and Godwin ultimately decides that he is on the right path because of “his passion for truth” and “right modes of sentiment” and because the “firmness and vigor” and the “richness of soil” present in his mind are evidence that he is proceeding correctly.

With a better understanding of Godwin’s dissociation and lack of empathy and of Godwin’s relationship with Wollstonecraft, it is easier to see Godwin’s work on Memoirs as a valid form of scriptotherapy undertaken in an effort to manage his potentially debilitating grief. Godwin does not /cannot allow himself a full emotional release so he must find another outlet through which he can mourn. In order to understand the importance of Godwin’s emotionally crippled mourning, one must understand how humans make sense of grief.

Finding Meaning and Narrative in Grief

Viktor Frankl believes that during times of great stress and little control, human beings search for something that is expected of them or required of them in the future (79). Frankl explains that individuals search for meaning in times of trauma:

This uniqueness and singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives a meaning to his existence has a bearing on creative work as much as it does human love. … A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work will never be able to throw away his life.
He knows the “why” for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any “how.” (79-80)

One can argue that *Memoirs* gave Godwin that “why” during the first few months after Wollstonecraft’s death, Godwin himself appears to acknowledge it in his letters. I would also argue that *Memoirs* was meant to give Godwin the sense of closure that he might normally have received at the funeral because one of the important functions of the funeral is the review of the life of a loved one and the assurance that the connection has not been forever severed. Trauma theory posits trauma survivors must, as the title of John H. Harvey’s book on the subject states, “give sorrow words.” Harvey believes that the difference between a loss that “heals and becomes generative” and one that does not is what he calls “the Story-Action model” (208). This model defines action as “behavior that reflects a person’s beliefs and values that are in turn reflected in that person’s story of loss and grief” (Harvey 208). Harvey uses Gordon Allport’s definition of social psychology to show that loss and storytelling may contain three steps. The first is a private construction of a story that contains a storyline or theme; assigns roles to individual; and follows a linear narrative with a beginning, middle and end. The second step is the imagined act of telling the story to others and imagining the reactions of the others. The final step would be the actual telling of the story (27). For Godwin, a writer, it makes sense that he would literally write down that story. It also makes sense given his philosophy that it is “a duty incumbent on survivors” to give “the public some account of the life of a person of eminent merit deceased” because it is in that way justice “is thus done to the illustrious dead” (*Memoirs* 43). In this way, Godwin is able to purge some of his grief without giving in to pure emotion.
Godwin’s *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft as a Public Act of Scriptotherapy

As noted in the introduction, many critics are perplexed by what they perceive as a lack of emotion in *Memoirs*. B. Sprague Allen points out that Godwin was a “paradoxical union of reason and feeling” and that if one could “explain this” one could better understand Godwin’s effect on his contemporaries and, one could add, his audience (2). Julie A. Carlson goes as far as saying “[d]ebilitating grief, then is not part of Godwin’s reality or comprehension of [death]” (169). However, Carlson is looking at Godwin’s emotional state based on his output as an author, and while I appreciate how she comes to her conclusion, I disagree with it. Godwin was mourning intensely, and it was debilitating to him, as his letters show. Godwin’s dissociation, however, limits the form that his grief can take. Csengei notes “[i]t is from the state that verges on the borderline of madness that [Godwin] started to mourn [Wollstonecraft]” (491). I agree with Csengei, but I believe Godwin was in this borderline state because of the extreme cognitive dissonance he was experiencing as a result of his dissociation rather than reading it, as Csengei does, through a Freudian lens. Leon Festinger first defined cognitive dissonance in 1957 as “the mental turmoil that is produced when a person holds two ideas that are incompatible” (Aronson Location 57). In 2009, Delia Brancila and Maurice B. Mittelmark defined cognitive dissonance as:

a state wherein a person: (1) holds elements of knowledge that have importance to the person and that are logically or psychologically incongruent with one another, (2) the incongruence is sufficiently serious to cause psychological distress, and (3) the person attempts to make
changes to resolve the incongruence. The generic condition underlying the
construct of interpersonal stress resides in circumstances in which one
expects understanding, sympathy, gratitude, encouragement, respect, and
the perceived actions or attitudes of others are in dissonance with such
expectations. (Brancila 260)

Using this definition, I would like to suggest that Godwin’s need for dissociation and his
belief in stoicism conflict with the overwhelming personal grief he feels after
Wollstonecraft died. These two cognitive states are in direct conflict and would cause
extreme dissonance, and Godwin was faced with the task of bringing himself back into
cognitive agreement, or consonance. Godwin himself expressed this dilemma to Skeys:
“I think I understand something as to the management of my own mind, & know how to
cultivate a virtuous melancholy, without indulging it to a dangerous extreme. I am at
present employed upon the papers she left behind, & compiling some materials for an
account of her life. This employment soothes, without agitating me” (GL 250). I believe
that Godwin used Memoirs as cognitive scriptotherapy to alleviate his both his
dissonance and his grief.

Godwin’s attempt at scriptotherapy meant that he would have to find a way to
purge his emotions safely and within the parameters of his dissociation. Unlike other
critics who do not find much emotion in the work, I find emotion throughout the text. I
believe that they are looking at the work from an incorrect viewpoint. Most critics are
looking for emotion on the part of Godwin as the narrator, emotion he could not share.
However if, as I believe, Godwin displaced his emotions onto Wollstonecraft in the work,
he could safely keep his distance from emotions that were too painful and at the same
time purge those emotions from his psyche as he expressed in his 23 October 1797 letter to Alderson:

> I find a pleasure, difficult to be described, in the cultivation of melancholy. It weakens indeed my stoicism in the ordinary occurrences of life; but it refines & raises my sensibility. But in the midst of this indulgence, I must prescribe certain limits to myself. I seek solitude; I love attach myself to those objects & employments that have nearest alliance to the person I loved; but I dare not sedulously call up to my mind the whole of the evil sustained, in the manner one does in writing a letter.

(GL 258)

Godwin also explained to Skeys that work on Memoirs “soothes, without agitating me” (GL 250). I believe that reason the emotional state of Wollstonecraft throughout the work seems so “other” is that when one looks at Wollstonecraft, one is seeing, in some sense, Godwin.

This displacement is apparent in the first chapter when Godwin describes the young Wollstonecraft: “Mary was distinguished in early youth, by some portion of that exquisite sensibility, soundness of understanding, and decision of character, which were the leading features of her mind through the whole course of her subsequent life” (Memoirs 45). The young Wollstonecraft sounds like a female copy of the character traits Godwin finds most admirable in himself as outlined in his “Analysis of Character.” Like the young Godwin, the young Wollstonecraft “experienced in the first period of her existence, few of those indulgences and marks of affection, which are principally calculated to sooth the subjection and sorrows of our early years. She was not the
favourite either of her father or mother” (45). While Wollstonecraft was never sent away to an abusive educator, she was still ruled by “a despot” in the figure of Wollstonecraft’s erratic, violent and abusive father, who was “subject to alternate fits of kindness and cruelty” (45). Godwin can even relive the unending Sundays with his puritanical father through Wollstonecraft:

When, in the Wrongs of Woman, Mary speaks of “the petty cares which obscured the morning of her heroine’s life; continual restraint in the most trivial matters; unconditional submission to orders, which, as a mere child, she soon discovered to be unreasonable, because inconsistent and contradictory; and the being often obliged to sit, in the presence of her parents, for three or four hours together, without daring to utter a word;” she is, I believe, to be considered as copying the outline of the first period of her own existence. (45)

Compare this description to Godwin’s memory of his father’s petty rule over the household and Godwin’s memory of being scolded for picking up a cat on the Sabbath in his autobiographical fragment. This does not mean that Godwin does not represent the “real” Wollstonecraft in his Memoirs; Godwin’s account of Wollstonecraft protecting her mother from abuse and her preference for the “active and hardy sports of her brothers” is evidence of Godwin’s attempt to show Wollstonecraft as an individual. The examples above only show that Godwin, in his grief, was able to use Wollstonecraft’s life as a safe outlet for his emotional excess.

Godwin uses the scenes of Wollstonecraft’s emotional attachment to others to purge his emotion. I believe this is why the scene of Wollstonecraft’s first meeting with
Fanny Blood reads more like “love at first sight” in a romance novel than a meeting between two young girls:

She was conducted to the door of a small house, but furnished with peculiar neatness and propriety. The first object that caught her sight, was a young woman of a slender and elegant form, and eighteen years of age, busily employed in feeding and managing some children, born of the same parents, but considerably inferior to her in age. The impression Mary received from this spectacle was indelible; and, before the interview was concluded, she had taken, in her heart, the vows of an eternal friendship.

(50)

Godwin is using his emotional attachment to Wollstonecraft to imagine her emotional attachment to Fanny Blood. At some level, Godwin may recognize this; hence he compares the meeting of the two girls to that of Werter and Charlotte. Of course, Wollstonecraft may have loved Blood with more than filial affection, but one wonders if she would have confided that to her spouse. The only explanation for this scene appears to be Godwin’s emotional displacement combined with his lack of empathy; Godwin wrote the scene as if he was the young Wollstonecraft and Blood was, in fact, the Wollstonecraft that Godwin adored. Godwin’s lack of empathy blinded him to the subtext, that the two girls were in love; the same subtext that the general reader of that age found so uncomfortable.

Godwin’s own emotional state would not have allowed him to remain in this fantasy for long, and, accordingly, he pulls back into himself with the description of Wollstonecraft at that age as “a wild, but animated and aspiring girl of sixteen” who
views Blood as someone superior to her (51). Although Godwin claims at the beginning of *Memoirs* that he has taken the elements of the work “from the mouth of the person to whom they relate,” he has clearly taken some artistic liberties to make the scenes come alive (44). In his images of Blood helping Wollstonecraft correct her grammar and spelling, Godwin may be portraying an idealized picture of himself working with Wollstonecraft on her texts decades later. This, I believe, is why the section of the book dealing with Wollstonecraft’s early relationship with Blood does not have the emotional distance that is so apparent in other portions of the book. Godwin uses the relationship between Wollstonecraft and Blood to relive his own relationship with Wollstonecraft in print and to purge some of the excess of emotion he is feeling about the loss of his lover and friend.

I believe Godwin again uses this displacement when he writes about Wollstonecraft’s feelings as Imlay’s attentions wander. The specter of Wollstonecraft’s/Godwin’s childhood is raised again to show how the small traumas of life combine to make the new trauma almost insurmountable: “She had been tossed and agitated by the waves of misfortune. Her childhood, as she often said, had known few of the endearments, which constitute the principal happiness of childhood. The temper of her father had early given to her mind a severe cast of thought, and substituted the inflexibility of resistance for the confidence of affection” (86-87). This sentiment resembles how Julia Kristeva explains her feelings today: “[T]he disenchantment that I experience here and now, cruel as it may be, appears, under scrutiny, to awaken echoes of old trauma, to which I have never been able to resign myself. I can thus discover the antecedents to my current breakdown in a loss, death, or grief over someone or something
that I once loved” (5-6). To someone like Godwin, a man who had come from a loveless childhood and had been rejected in love as an adult until his successful relationship with Wollstonecraft, the loss of his loving spouse would have reopened the trauma of that history of lovelessness. Because of his own traumatic experiences, Godwin is able to make a statement in Memoirs that is almost an exact forerunner of what trauma theorist are saying to today:

Some persons may be inclined to observe, that the evils here enumerated, are not among the heaviest in the catalogue of human calamities. But evils take their rank, more from the temper of the mind that suffers them, than from their abstract nature. Upon a man of a hard and insensible disposition, the shafts of misfortune often fall pointless and impotent. There are persons, by no means hard and insensible, who, from an elastic and sanguine turn of mind, are continually prompted to look on the fair side of things, and, having suffered one fall, immediately rise again, to pursue their course, with the same eagerness, the same hope, and the same gaiety, as before. On the other hand, we not unfrequently meet with persons, endowed with the most exquisite and delicious sensibility, whose minds seem almost of too fine a texture to encounter the vicissitudes of human affairs, to whom pleasure is transport, and disappointment is agony indescribable. (87-88)

This is a complete theory of trauma and its effect on an individual written 182 years before trauma theory is recognized by modern psychiatry and nearly 100 years prior to the evolution of psychiatry as a whole. I believe it is Godwin’s own early trauma that
allows him to recognize that the individual, not the society as a whole, defines trauma and traumatic situations. Godwin makes another amazingly psychologically astute observation when he muses on why individuals commit suicide in the context of Wollstonecraft’s suicide attempts:

> It is perhaps not an unfrequent case with suicides, that we find reason to suppose, if they had survived their gloomy purpose, that they would, at a subsequent period, have been considerably happy. It arises indeed, in some measure, out of the very nature of a spirit of self-destruction; which implies a degree of anguish, that the constitution of the human mind will not suffer to remain long undiminished. This is a serious reflection, probably no man would destroy himself from an impatience of present pain, if he felt a moral certainty that there were years of enjoyment still in reserve for him. It is perhaps a futile attempt, to think of reasoning with a man in that state of mind which precedes suicide. Moral reasoning is nothing but the awakening of certain feelings: and the feeling by which he is actuated, is too strong to leave us much chance of impressing him with other feelings, that should have force enough to counterbalance it. But, if the prospect of future tranquillity and pleasure cannot be expected to have much weight with a man under an immediate purpose of suicide. (sic, Memoirs 97)

Again, Godwin, by displacing his feelings onto Wollstonecraft, is able to gain an insight that would not otherwise be possible. However, Godwin also uses this aside to validate his own conscious dissociation from painful feelings when he ends the discussion: “it is
so much the more to be wished, that men would impress their minds, in their sober
moments, with a conception, which, being rendered habitual, seems to promise to act as a
successful antidote in a paroxysm of desperation” (97).

Godwin’s portrayal of Wollstonecraft as she falls in love with Imlay, then suffers
from debilitating depression, and finally makes unsupportable decisions during the end of
the Imlay affair are some of the most three-dimensional depictions in Memoirs. I
attribute this to Godwin’s displacement of his own grief and desperation onto
Wollstonecraft as well. The evidence for this conclusion is in the link between Godwin’s
and Wollstonecraft’s correspondence and the depiction Godwin creates. In Memoirs,
Godwin says that Wollstonecraft “brought then, in the present instance, a wounded and
sick heart, to take refuge in the bosom of a chosen friend” (88). Wollstonecraft first
expressed a version of this sentiment to Godwin in a letter she wrote on 4 September
1796: “you will fright away a poor weary bird who, taking refuge in your bosom, hoped
to nestle there—to the end of the chapter” (G&M 26-27). Wollstonecraft had expressed a
similar sentiment to Imlay but in context of hiding her face “glowing with shame for
[her] folly” so it is doubtful that Godwin would have taken the sentiment from that letter
(LI 27). However on 20 April 1797, Godwin re-crafts the sentiment, while writing to
Wollstonecraft, in a version very similar to the version he uses in Memoirs: “I found a
wounded heart, & as that heart cast itself upon me, it was my ambition to heal it. Do not
let me be wholly disappointed” (GL 201). This is very nearly the same context in which
the statement is used in Memoirs. Wollstonecraft trusts her heart to someone for that
person to keep it and heal it, making this April letter to Wollstonecraft and the September
letter to Godwin better sources for the sentiment.
There is also evidence for displacement in the link between Godwin’s description of Wollstonecraft in love with Imlay and the letters Godwin and Wollstonecraft shared. Godwin writes:

her whole character seemed to change with a change of fortune. Her sorrows, the depression of her spirits, were forgotten, and she assumed all the simplicity and the vivacity of a youthful mind. She was like a serpent upon a rock, that casts its slough, and appears again with the brilliancy, the sleekness, and the elastic activity of its happiest age. She was playful, full of confidence, kindness and sympathy. Her eyes assumed new lustre, and her cheeks new colour and smoothness. Her voice became cheerful; her temper overflowing with universal kindness; and that smile of bewitching tenderness from day to day illuminated her countenance, which all who knew her will so well recollect, and which won, both heart and soul, the affection of almost everyone that beheld it. (88)

This version of Wollstonecraft appears in the letters to Godwin more so than in the extant letters written to Imlay. It is to Godwin that Wollstonecraft writes a little note with a fairy tale context “I send no Amulet to day: but beware of enchantments,” showing the light-hearted and playful side of her that Godwin describes (G&M 26). In a letter to Charlotte Smith, Godwin, who was already working on Memoirs describes Wollstonecraft as “one bright ray that streaked my day of life” a sentiment in keeping with his description of Wollstonecraft in the first flush of love with Imlay (GL 263).

Because the family has heavily edited the documents regarding Godwin and Wollstonecraft, it is difficult to match Memoirs to letters exactly; however, there is
compelling evidence in the extant letters that Godwin used his own memories to create the loving Wollstonecraft he depicts in the Imlay sections of the work. However one must ask: Why is the Wollstonecraft depicted in the Imlay chapters more emotionally developed and Godwin’s tone less distant than when Godwin turns to his own relationship with Wollstonecraft? The most probable answer is that Godwin is able to safely displace the feelings of abandonment that result from Wollstonecraft’s death on to Wollstonecraft as she experiences the abandonment of Imlay. Godwin’s emotions of love and tenderness can be displaced safely in the Imlay portion of the book because Godwin did not personally experience this time with Wollstonecraft; therefore, he is not able to recognize the emotion as his own. In contrast, in the sections on his romance with Wollstonecraft, Godwin’s emotion is too close to the surface to allow him to examine it safely. The only time Godwin can safely do so is when there is no actual connection in the narrative between himself and Wollstonecraft. The closest Godwin ever explicitly comes to emotionally connecting himself with Wollstonecraft in the narration is when he imagines “what if” near the end of chapter one. Godwin notes that he and Wollstonecraft were living in close proximity in the town of Hoxton in 1776. At that point, Godwin was a twenty-year-old student at Hoxton College, and Wollstonecraft was a seventeen-year-old. Godwin muses over what might have been when he writes:

It is perhaps a question of curious speculation to enquire, what would have been the amount of difference in the pursuits and enjoyments of each party, if they had met, and considered each other with the same distinguishing regard in 1776, as they were afterwards impressed with in the year 1796. … Which would have been predominant; the
disadvantages of obscurity, and the pressure of a family; or the
gratifications and improvement that might have flowed from their
intercourse? (Memoirs 49)

Even as Godwin muses over the possibilities, he understands, especially after their first
disastrous meeting, that he and Wollstonecraft would not have been the same two people
and would not have been able accomplishment what they did apart. The implication is
that, while he would like to have had thirty years with Wollstonecraft, Godwin would not
want to do so at the risk of losing the experiences that made Wollstonecraft (and by
extension Godwin) the person she (he) was in 1796. This undertone is also a product of
the distance Godwin must enforce on his unruly emotional state.

A comparable emotional undertone is present again when Godwin relates
Wollstonecraft’s desperate attempts to keep the relationship with Imlay alive. Godwin
writes: “Her ardent imagination was continually conjuring up pictures of the happiness
she should have found, if fortune had favoured their more intimate union. She felt herself
formed for domestic affection, and all those tender charities, which men of sensibility
have constantly treated as the dearest band of human society. General conversation and
society could not satisfy her” (81). This interesting comment echoes the sentiment that
Godwin expressed to Carlisle during Wollstonecraft’s funeral: “Nothing could be more
soothing to my mind that to dwell in a long letter upon her virtues & accomplishments, &
our mutual happiness past & in prospect. But the attractions of this subject are delusive,
& I dare not trust myself with it” (GL 246). In reviewing Wollstonecraft’s life, Godwin
can again displace his own feelings and, in this case, the fantasies in which he dares not
indulge upon Wollstonecraft’s character and live them vicariously through writing about her experiences.

This displacement resurfaces again in *Memoirs* when Godwin describes Wollstonecraft’s last year with Imlay, the year that included her two suicide attempts: “Perhaps no human creature ever suffered greater misery, than dyed the whole year 1795, in the life of this incomparable woman. It was wasted in that sort of despair, to the sense of which the mind is continually awakened, by a glimmering of fondly cherished, expiring hope” (91). In the context of Wollstonecraft’s life, Godwin is again expressing sentiments of his own mourning as he expressed it in letters to his friends. In the letter to Carlisle, Godwin wrote of his own struggles with “expiring hope” when he wrote that he dared not let himself be soothed by dwelling upon “our mutual happiness past & in prospect” (GL 246). There are parallels again when Godwin anticipates his readers’ desire to know why Wollstonecraft tried so desperately to keep the Imlay relationship alive: “Why did she thus obstinately cling to an ill-starred, unhappy passion? Because it is of the very essence of affection, to seek to perpetuate itself. He does not love, who can resign this cherished sentiment, without suffering some of the sharpest struggles that our nature is capable of enduring” (*Memoirs* 91). Notice the similarity between the emotion Godwin ascribes to Wollstonecraft and the statements he makes in his letter to Holcroft on the day of Wollstonecraft’s death when he writes: “I firmly believe that there does not exist her equal in the world. I know from experience we were formed to make each other happy. I have not the least expectation that I can now ever know happiness again” (GL 237).
Indeed, throughout *Memoirs*, Wollstonecraft comes alive only when she is in situations that Godwin himself has experienced. When Wollstonecraft single-handedly saves the people aboard the French ship, there is no emotion attached to what could be a very dramatic moment in the work, but Wollstonecraft when writing her *Answer to Burke’s Reflections* is presented as active and passionate. This Wollstonecraft is “full of sentiments of liberty, and impressed with a warm interest in the struggle that was now going on, she seized her pen in the first burst of indignation” and writes with “vehemence and impetuousness” (*Memoirs* 73). While Godwin’s publications may not appear to contain any of these emotions, I believe Godwin, as an author, experienced the feelings he represents as belonging to Wollstonecraft. This is particularly apparent when Godwin describes Wollstonecraft’s creation of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Godwin writes: “Never did any author enter into a cause, with a more ardent desire to be found, not a flourishing and empty declaimer, but an effectual champion. She considered herself as standing forth in defence of one half of the human species” and “[t]he work is certainly a very bold and original production,” which “cannot but make a strong impression upon every ingenuous reader” (*Memoirs* 74-75). In fact, Godwin pays Wollstonecraft the ultimate compliment, writing, “the sentiments are undoubtedly of a rather masculine description” (75). Compare this description to Godwin’s description of his own philosophical triumph *Political Justice* as Godwin described it in 1822, shortly after P.B. Shelley’s death. Godwin calls his own work “as fearless a work as ever was written” and continues, “[i]f any one be desirous, now or hereafter, to see what would be written on the most important questions, by a mind full of philanthropy, unshackled by the ordinary prejudices of age and country and fearless of censure, he should read Political
Justice. This is all I have to say of it’’ (Length 62). While Godwin’s narcissism is impossible to dismiss, he is attributing the same characteristics to Wollstonecraft as an author in Memoirs as he does to himself as the author of a text of importance and ultimately concludes that her book “will be read as long as the English language endures” (Memoirs 76). Godwin even goes further, perhaps channeling his feelings about his own works, writing “Mary Wollstonecraft will perhaps hereafter be found to have performed more substantial service for the cause of her sex, than all the other writers, male or female, that ever felt themselves animated in the behalf of oppressed and injured beauty” (76). Godwin’s narcissism, however, will not allow him to give Wollstonecraft credit for changing all of human kind, as he believes his own work did.

Another intersection of Wollstonecraft and Godwin as authors occurs when Godwin describes the pain of working as a translator—robotically translating someone else’s creation into English. There is little doubt that Godwin is using his own feelings from his first years as a poor scribbler when he writes:

It perhaps deserves to be remarked that this sort of miscellaneous literary employment, seems, for the time at least, rather to damp and contract, than to enlarge and invigorate, the genius. The writer is accustomed to see his performances answer the mere mercantile purpose of the day, and confounded with those of persons to whom he is secretly conscious of a superiority. No neighbour mind serves as a mirror to reflect the generous confidence he felt within himself; and perhaps the man never yet existed, who could maintain his enthusiasm to its full vigour, in the midst of this
kind of solitariness. He is touched with the torpedo of mediocrity.

*(Memoirs 69)*

This is a safe subject for Godwin to discuss and through which to express emotion because, again, it is being expressed in terms of Wollstonecraft’s emotions and experiences. To ensure that the commentary is read as Wollstonecraft’s, Godwin adds, “I believe that nothing which Mary produced during this period, is marked with those daring flights, which exhibit themselves in the little fiction she composed just before its commencement” (69-70). However, by adding “I believe” at the beginning of the statement, Godwin actually reminds readers that the commentary above was his alone.

When Godwin retreats back into his shell of dissociation and the narrative becomes more distant, the work often ceases to be about Wollstonecraft at all. At these points, Godwin is most likely to bring in his own musings, or opinions. These asides and commentaries make scholars question the genre of *Memoirs*. In my opinion, however, these asides point to *Memoirs* as primarily scriptotherapy masquerading as a biography. For instance, Godwin’s distance, when he discusses Wollstonecraft’s early life, attendance at her mother’s deathbed, and her attempts to financially rescue her siblings and the Bloods, give us greater insight into Godwin than they do Wollstonecraft. The specter of Godwin’s perceived neglect as a child shows through when he discusses the way the Wollstonecraft children were raised:

> All her children were vigorous and healthy. This seems very much to depend upon the management of our infant years. It is affirmed by some persons of the present day, most profoundly skilled in the sciences of health and disease, that there is no period of human life so little subject to
mortality, as the period of infancy. Yet from the mismanagement to which children are exposed, many of the diseases of childhood are rendered fatal, and more persons die in that, than in any other period of human life. (47)

Clearly Godwin’s resentment has not mellowed over time, as his 1800 autobiographical fragment also shows. The echo of Godwin’s own attendance at his father’s side may echo through when he describes how Wollstonecraft became unappreciated as she tended her mother during Mrs. Wollstonecraft’s final illness: “At first, every attention was received with acknowledgments and gratitude; but, as the attentions grew habitual, and the health of the mother more and more wretched, they were rather exacted, than received” (53). One wonders if Godwin did not feel the same as a (least-favorite) child, when attending his father.

The more interesting asides during this period of Wollstonecraft’s life, however, are Godwin’s sentiments on helping others and cohabitation. Godwin appears to feel that Wollstonecraft wasted her time and energy trying to support others when he comments:

she may be said to have been, in a great degree, the victim of a desire to promote the benefit of others. She did not foresee the severe disappointment with which an exclusive purpose of this sort is pregnant; she was inexperienced enough to lay a stress upon the consequent gratitude of those she benefited; and she did not sufficiently consider that, in proportion as we involve ourselves in the interests and society of others, we acquire a more exquisite sense of their defects, and are tormented with their untractableness and folly. (Memoirs 55)
One can attribute this comment to Godwin’s lack of empathy and his narcissism, but there is an undertone here that is strangely bitter. Is this Godwin’s personal experience? Is this how Wollstonecraft really felt? Again, this is one of the questions we will never definitively answer, but I believe that at least some of this sentiment is Godwin’s own and that it is reflected in his “Analysis” comment about his next spouse needing to devote herself to him and his happiness, as quoted above.

Godwin’s comments on cohabitation also raise questions. Godwin remarks: “Cohabitation is a point of delicate experiment, and is, in a majority of instances, pregnant with ill-humour and unhappiness”(63). Godwin then explains that Wollstonecraft “resolved” to never again help her sisters in a way that entrenched “upon her own liberty” (63). Is this comment a repetition of Wollstonecraft’s sentiments? Or is it Godwin’s interpretation of Wollstonecraft’s sentiments and actions? The harsh tone of the sentiment appears to be more Godwin’s, but Wollstonecraft’s many disappointments in her own cohabitations cannot be discounted. I believe that this comment has two purposes, the first is biographical and the second is defensive. In this comment, he is preparing his readers for Wollstonecraft’s unusual living arrangements with both Imlay and Godwin. He is showing how Wollstonecraft’s earlier disappointments lead to her decision not to marry Imlay and to her reluctance to marry Godwin. I believe this comment is in the same vein as the comment to Skeys about his “romantic” notions of what the public wanted to read. Perhaps, subconsciously, Godwin knows he is going to shock his audience; after all he was a witness to the public rudeness of Mrs. Inchbald and Sarah Siddons towards Wollstonecraft after her marriage to Godwin. As more evidence for this being a defensive comment, Godwin felt the need to justify his narrative, writing:
“There are no circumstances of her life, that, in the judgment of honour and reason, could brand her with disgrace. Never did there exist a human being, that needed, with less fear, expose all their actions, and call upon the universe to judge them” (Memoirs 103).

Godwin is attempting to instruct his audience how to react to the information he presents. However, I read some guilt and regret in the discussion of cohabitation above and especially when Godwin discusses his living arrangements with Wollstonecraft after his marriage. Godwin writes: “we were both of us of the opinion, that it was possible for two persons to be too uniformly in each other’s society. Influenced by that opinion, it was my practice to repair to the apartment I have mentioned as soon as I rose, and frequently not to make my appearance in the Polygon, till the hour of dinner” (110). Although Godwin explains that the couple “spent the latter half of each day” together, he appears to feel the need to justify this separation: “We seemed to combine, in a considerable degree, the novelty and lively sensation of visit, with the more delicious and heart-felt pleasures of domestic life” (110). I believe this reflexive justification is, in part, a product of Godwin’s dissociated regret and anger that he did not have more time with Wollstonecraft. These are normal reactions to bereavement, but Godwin would have felt the need to limit them if not excise them completely; therefore, he writes defensively about the time the couple spent together to emphasize, both to himself and his audience, that it was a mutual choice.

This same guilt and regret is evident when Godwin tells of the two days and one evening he spends away from the dying Wollstonecraft. First Godwin explains that he believed Wollstonecraft to be on the mend, then he explains his second absence: “Encouraged by what I considered as the progress of her recovery, I accompanied a
friend in the morning in several calls, one of them as far as Kensington, and did not return till dinner-time” (114-15). Upon his return, Godwin finds out that Wollstonecraft has been asking for him and writes: “I felt a pang at having been so long and so unseasonably absent, and determined that I would not repeat the fault” (115). However, this does not change the fact that Godwin missed two of Wollstonecraft’s final days and one of her final evenings—time he would never be able to recover. Godwin may be rationalizing this absence in his letter to Holcroft written on the afternoon of Wollstonecraft’s death. Godwin writes: “Nobody has greater call to reproach himself, except for want of kindness & attention, in which I hope I have not been very deficient, than I have. But reproach could answer no good purpose, & I will not harbour it” (GL 237). Godwin’s dissociation and dissonance would have demanded the almost emotionless recounting of his own time with Wollstonecraft and especially the traumatic last ten days of her life. Indeed, Godwin’s distance from his subject is more apparent in this portion of the book than in any other.

It is almost a mental shock to see the three-dimensional Wollstonecraft from chapter eight reduced to the paper-thin persona found in the final two chapters. Of course, these chapters would have been the hardest and most dangerous to write from Godwin’s perspective. The potential to be overwhelmed by emotions exists on every page. The only way Godwin can allow himself to cover this period of Wollstonecraft’s life is to separate the character on the page from the woman he knew, and thus Godwin can keep his dissociated shell intact. Godwin introduces the chapters that will address his relationship with Wollstonecraft almost as if he is preparing for battle: “I shall relate with the same simplicity that has pervaded every other part of my narrative. If there ever
were any motives of prudence or delicacy, that could impose a qualification upon the
story, they are now over” (103). While this may appear to be a warning that Godwin’s
emotional nature will surface, it is in fact the opposite. By qualifying the chapter with
words like “simplicity” and explaining that he will not impose “prudence” or “delicacy”
upon the tale, Godwin is actually in the process of sifting all emotion out of the narrative
and focusing on honesty that verges on brutality.

In these chapters Godwin even avoids the emotion he earlier connected to
Wollstonecraft’s *Letters from Norway*. In the previous chapter when reviewing
Wollstonecraft’s book, Godwin notes, “[i]f ever there was a book calculated to make a
man in love with its author, this is the book” (95). Godwin can express his feeling about
Wollstonecraft and her work in this chapter because the emotion is connected with Imlay.
Note that Godwin finds the work calculating—which appears to be in direct conflict with
Wollstonecraft’s doctrine of how a woman should behave in *A Vindication of the Right of
Woman*. However, Godwin most likely means the word “calculated” in its mathematical
sense, rather than as diabolical feminine plotting, which helps enforce his distance from
the emotion that may surface. Now Godwin merely notes that he read *Letters* in January
of 1796 and “the impression that the book produced upon me has been already related”
(103). Does Godwin want readers to remember his comment on the book being
“calculated” to make a man fall in love with Wollstonecraft? Possibly, but I believe
Godwin actually meant for readers to take his entire review and criticism of the book into
consideration because he would not have wanted to emotionally associate himself with
this part of the narrative.
Godwin then immediately launches into his catalogue of the dates that show up regularly in these two chapters, as if he were giving a timeline rather than telling a love story, with the effect of defusing any potential emotional connection. Godwin only relates that after “the fourteenth of April,” his relationship with Wollstonecraft increased in intimacy “by regular, but almost imperceptible degrees” (*Memoirs* 103). Godwin then proceeds to dissect their relationship explaining that it was not a customary relationship: “[o]ne sex did not take priority” over the other, and Godwin was “not conscious that either party can assume to have been the agent or the patient, the toil-spreader or the prey, in the affair” (104). Godwin even jumps ahead to note that there will not be a torrid declaration of love: “When, in the course of things, the disclosure came, there was nothing, in a manner, for either party to disclose to the other” (104). When discussing Wollstonecraft’s subsequent move to London, Godwin does not attach it to their relationship; instead he gives readers a trivial detail about Wollstonecraft having left furniture in storage in London—almost as if that was the primary motivation for her move.

Godwin only expresses his relationship with Wollstonecraft in language that could be considered emotional, romantic, or poetic in a very small portion of the work. Godwin discusses their feelings after a short separation by invoking the mystical: “Absence bestows a refined and aërial delicacy upon affection, which it with difficulty acquires in any other way. It seems to resemble the communication of spirits, without the medium, or the impediment, of this earthly frame”(*Memoirs* 104). Godwin appears to let go of his emotional leash for the next two paragraphs, and there is some sense of the poetic in his language; although, he usually follows the airy poetic statement with a
dampening statement. Godwin tells of “the sentiment that trembled upon the tongue” which then “burst from the lips” as they declared their love, only to then write: “There was, as I have already said, no period of throes and resolute explanation” (104). When Godwin then tells readers “[i]t was friendship melting into love,” the distance the prior statement imposed must be bridged to reclaim any emotion. Godwin then describes Wollstonecraft’s feelings: “Mary rested her head upon the shoulder of her lover, hoping to find a heart with which she might safely treasure her world of affection; fearing to commit a mistake, yet, in spite of her melancholy experience, fraught with that generous confidence, which, in a great soul, is never extinguished” (105). This sentiment, however, has been taken from Wollstonecraft’s letters so there is no danger to Godwin in repeating it. Wollstonecraft provided the image of the little bird nestling into the arms of its lover and protector in her letter of 31 August 1796, as noted above (G&M 26-27). On 17 August, Wollstonecraft wrote to Godwin expressing her difficulties in trusting their relationship. Wollstonecraft writes that her mind “has been painfully active” and is “haunted by old sorrows that seemed to come forward with new force to sharpen the present anguish” (G &M 18). To create the seemingly emotionally charged paragraph, Godwin only has to combine these two letters with his already quoted letter about Wollstonecraft resting her head on his shoulder. The sentiment was crafted without having to invest any emotion into it; Godwin simply has to locate the phrases in the letters that he had already reviewed with a critical eye and the intention of culling phrases as a detached editor. Godwin imposes distance from any emotion that may be implied when he dispassionately discusses his feelings, “I had never loved till now; or, at least, had never nourished a passion to the same growth, or met with an object so
consummately worthy” (Memoirs 105). To ensure the distance remains, Godwin immediately begins the next paragraph with “[w]e did not marry” and proceeds to give a lecture on the “ridiculous” nature of the requirement for a marriage ceremony (105). Godwin manages to maintain this distance throughout the rest of the chapter, including his famous announcement that his “principle motive” for marrying Wollstonecraft was her “state of pregnancy” (106). Ironically, this announcement comes directly after Godwin’s explanation that Wollstonecraft “had an extreme aversion to be[ing] made the topic of vulgar discussion” (105).

The distance Godwin imposes on the narrative makes some of his sentiments appear smug rather than appearing as unsentimental commentary. An excellent example of this effect comes when Godwin attempts to discuss Wollstonecraft’s happiness and contentment during their time together. Godwin begins the discussion with “I think I may venture to say, that no two persons ever found in each other’s society, a satisfaction more pure and refined” (Memoirs 109). However because Godwin does not discuss how marriage made him happier, the following discussion of Wollstonecraft as “a worshipper of domestic life,” who “extract[ed] sentiments of exquisite delight, from trifles, which, a suspicious and formal wisdom would scarcely deign to remark,” sounds more self-congratulatory than factual—especially when Godwin ends the discussion by announcing that he was “fortunate enough to introduce her to some of my acquaintance of both sexes” (110). This passage makes it sound as if Godwin was responsible for raising her station in life, even though he has been dropping the names of famous and infamous people with whom Wollstonecraft associated throughout the text. This impression is reinforced when Godwin ends the chapter by discussing Wollstonecraft’s unfinished novel, The Wrongs of
Woman. After mercilessly critiquing Wollstonecraft’s body of work, with the exception of Letters from Norway, throughout the text, Godwin focuses on the difference between those works and the unfinished novel. Godwin explains that Wollstonecraft wanted her “talents” to “effect what they were capable of effecting” (111). Then he continues: “She was sensible how arduous a task it is to produce a truly excellent novel; and she roused her faculties to grapple with it” (111). Again, the undertone of the discussion is that Wollstonecraft, who was now associated with a novelist known for his meticulous crafting of Caleb Williams (i.e. Godwin himself), is now steadied enough to feel “herself more urgently stimulated to revise and improve what she had written, than to proceed, with constancy of application” and is no longer producing works with the “rapidity” that Godwin continually criticizes when discussing Wollstonecraft’s works (Memoirs 111).

The most emotionally difficult chapter and the chapter most likely to break Godwin’s strict control over his dissociation is the final chapter, which is dedicated to the final ten days of Wollstonecraft’s life. Accordingly, this is the section of the work that contains the least amount of Godwin’s emotions. The timeline continues without a break as Godwin describes Wollstonecraft’s delivery of the baby, Mary, and the subsequent retention and manual removal of the placenta. Godwin meticulously recounts his decision to have Dr. Fordyce in for a second opinion. Godwin’s tone is so dispassionate that he can only describe the onset of Wollstonecraft’s illness with a vague reference: “What had passed however in the night between Wednesday and Thursday, had so far alarmed me, that I did not quit the house and scarcely the chamber during the following day” (Memoirs 114). This is a discordant note in his fact-based testimony, but it reads that way because of the lack of description rather than the notation of Godwin’s alarm.
He continues this dispassionate and vague accounting of the days noting that on Friday, Wollstonecraft’s appearance was “more favourable, than the exhausted state of the patient would almost have permitted me to expect” (114). Therefore, Godwin leaves the house for the day on “a business of some urgency” with out any repercussion aside from the lingering guilt mentioned above (114). Godwin nearly skips the next day, Saturday, in his account, devoting only one sentence to it that describes the day as “less auspicious than Friday, but not absolutely alarming” (114). This lack of pertinent detail lulls Godwin’s readers into a state where the coming details of Wollstonecraft’s illness seem doubly shocking.

Certainly, the details Godwin chooses to expose such as the detailed description of Wollstonecraft’s shivering fits, where “[e]very muscle of the body trembled, the teeth chattered, and the bed shook,” and the notation that puppies were brought in “to draw off the milk” after Dr. Fordyce “forbad the child’s having the breast” are not details that most women, even modern women, would want exposed to the general public (Memoirs 115-16). These details are even more horrifying because it is these clinical, degrading images on which Godwin dwells rather than Wollstonecraft’s “cheerings” that Godwin feels were “so delightful, that [he] hugged her obstinately to [his] heart” (115). Why can he dwell on the horrifying and not the tender? I believe that this is another sign of the strict control that Godwin forced on himself. By focusing on the clinical images, Godwin is focused on a dying body, rather than having to remember the dying personality and character of the woman he loved. As long as the focus is clinical, he can maintain his distance from the situation in the text as he attempted to do in reality by “pertinaciously persist[ing] on viewing the fair side of things,” (116). In other words, Godwin was in
denial during the actual events. The only real emotion that comes through in Godwin’s
discussion of Wollstonecraft’s final days, despite comments like dwelling “with
trembling fondness” and being rewarded by “her smiles and kind speeches” is a self-
centered frustration when Godwin discusses Wednesday, 30 August 1797, a week before
Wollstonecraft’s death and calls it “the day of greatest torture in the melancholy series”
(116). Godwin notes: “It was now decided that the only chance of supporting
[Wollstonecraft] through what she had to suffer, was by supplying her rather freely with
wine” (116). Godwin’s frustration is apparent when he writes:

This task was devolved upon me. I began about four o’clock in the
afternoon. But for me, totally ignorant of the nature of diseases and of the
human frame, thus to play with a life that now seemed all that was dear to
me in the universe, was too dreadful a task. I knew neither what was too
much, nor what was too little. Having begun, I felt compelled, under every
disadvantage, to go on. (116)

One gets the sense that rather than being worried that Wollstonecraft is not suffering
excessively, Godwin is frustrated because he was not given more detailed instructions or
that the responsibility was not given to someone more suitable, such as a nurse. It is this
sense of frustration that drives Godwin to “foolishly” ask the opinion of one of the
servants: “she replied, ‘that, in her judgment, she was going as fast as possible.’ There
are moments, when any creature that lives, has power to drive one into madness. I
seemed to know the absurdity of this reply; but that was of no consequence. It added to
the measure of my distraction” (116-17). Godwin’s emotional response is channeled into
frustration with his role and anger at a servant rather than allowing himself to feel the
grief that is imminent, another way of disconnecting from an ongoing trauma. After this episode, Godwin retreats into vague descriptions of the days and concentrates more on praising the friends who kept the vigil with him and the skill and caring of the physicians than either himself or Wollstonecraft. I believe that this disconnection is in part because of his need to limit his emotional involvement and the inherent emotional distress that brings, but there is also the very real possibility that due to his dissociated state, Godwin cannot give his readers a detailed account of Wollstonecraft’s final days. Those memories may be inaccessible. This would help account for the unevenness and contradictions in Godwin’s description of Wollstonecraft’s final hours and her lack of final words or instructions. In one paragraph, Godwin states: “On these two days [Friday and Saturday] her faculties were in too decayed a state to be able to follow any train of ideas with force or any accuracy of connection” (Memoirs 118). After describing Wollstonecraft’s lack of mental faculties, Godwin then turns to Wollstonecraft’s religion and remarks “during her whole illness, not one word of a religious cast fell from her lips” (118). In addition, Godwin gives an account of his rambling attempt to ask Wollstonecraft, the morning before her death, if she had any final instructions “that she might wish to have followed after her decease” (119). Keep in mind that Godwin has already stated Wollstonecraft cannot follow “any train of ideas with force” (118). Yet, Godwin recounts their conversation as follows:

In conformity to Mr. Carlisle’s maxim of not impressing the idea of death, I was obliged to manage my expressions. I therefore affected to proceed wholly upon the ground of her having been very ill, and that it would be some time before she could expect to be well; wishing her to tell me any
thing that she would choose to have done respecting the children. After having repeated this idea to her in a great variety of forms, she at length said, with a significant tone of voice, “I know what you are thinking of,” but added, that she had nothing to communicate to me upon the subject.”

(Memoirs 119)

If the discussion was as obtuse as the description makes it appear, there really is no chance of a person who is not in control of his or her faculties following the conversational thread. Yet Godwin recounts this as factual retelling of the events. Of course, there is the possibility that Wollstonecraft regained a final moment of lucidity, but one must also allow for the idea that Godwin misremembers or misinterprets Wollstonecraft’s “significant tone of voice” in order to understand why he does not have instructions on how to proceed with the two motherless girls for whom he is now responsible. In fact, as Godwin has never been good at interpreting emotions in others, this is a very real possibility. Godwin himself pointed out this flaw in an undated letter he wrote to Wollstonecraft: “How can I always distinguish between your jest & earnest, & know when your satire means too much & when it means nothing? But I will try” (G&M 50). The emotionless recounting of the deathbed discussion, no matter its cause, is part of what makes the whole recounting so anathematic both to critics and to Godwin’s contemporaries. Godwin’s sparse recounting of Wollstonecraft’s death only emphasizes this lack of emotion. Godwin simply writes: “She expired at twenty minutes before eight” (120). The text then picks up again with a plain description of Wollstonecraft’s burial and the inscription on her headstone.
Godwin’s final words on Wollstonecraft appear to be the introduction to an emotional recounting of the woman he loved. His first few sentences prepare for this, saying:

The loss of the world in this admirable woman, I leave to other men to collect; my own I well know, nor can it be improper to describe it. I do not here allude to the personal pleasures I enjoyed in her conversation: these increased every day, in proportion as we knew each other better, and as our mutual confidence increased. They can be measured only by the treasures of her mind, and the virtues of her heart. (Memoirs 120)

However Godwin, after once again promising to describe his loss, pulls back from the narration with the next sentence: “But this is a subject for meditation, not for words. What I purposed alluding to, was the improvement that I have for ever lost” (120-21). Memoirs ends not with a review of what Wollstonecraft meant to the world or even her husband but with a monologue that centers on Godwin himself and only mentions Wollstonecraft occasionally. Readers finish the book with an excellent overview of Godwin’s “ambition for intellectual distinction” and how Godwin and Wollstonecraft were intellectually different but with very little sense of who Wollstonecraft really was as a person and author. After describing Wollstonecraft as the light that “was lent to me for a very short period, and is now extinguished for ever, Godwin again emotionally withdraws from the text and explains that he believes he has “put down the leading traits of her intellectual character,” which means he has described Wollstonecraft’s mind and not her (122). The book ends on this dispassionate description with Godwin’s emotions undisclosed. Carlson’s reading of the final paragraphs of Memoirs asserts that Godwin is
expressing exactly what he felt: “precisely what [Godwin] has gained and then lost in Wollstonecraft is the physical benefit of the collision of minds that characterized their lives together and that altered his “personal” habits of mind,” and because of this, “Godwin is diminished and feels his mind to be set back by the loss of her person”(43). While one cannot argue that Godwin felt intellectually set back, this reading assumes that Godwin privileged his intellectual connection with Wollstonecraft over their emotional connection. After looking at letters between the two, I have to disagree. It is clear that the emotional attachment enhanced the intellectual attachment rather than the other way around. The reason that Memoirs privileges their intellectual connection is that it allows Godwin to avoid, as he wrote to Charlotte Smith, the “intellectual danger, & just to keep within the line which every moral & honourable consideration forbid me to overstep” (GL 263). This is another strategy of dissociation for Godwin; much like the emphasis on factual depiction, focusing on the intellectual allows Godwin to suppress the emotions of which he is so afraid.

**Godwin’s Mourning Process: Creating Consonance and Meaning**

One final question remains: if Memoirs was scriptotherapy, how effective was it? In order to evaluate Memoirs as scriptotherapy, one must return to the process of grief, in particular the process of grief recovery. There are eight “major concepts of loss theory” that Henry and other loss theorists see as integral to the process of healing. These include: the perceived control and predictability of the loss; the meaning found in the
loss; the assumptions shattered by the loss; the ability to find justice for the loss; working through the grief; reactions that include long- and short-term episodic memory, the memories of the loved one that will resurface; the intrusion of loss and thoughts of loss; the ability to adapt to the loss; the generativity of the loss—meaning the ability to teach someone else from one’s own experience; the actual movement through bereavement, mourning, and grief; and finally, the problem of disenfranchised grief (Harvey 22-26). A glance at the above list is enough to see the probability of Godwin experiencing one more of these concepts as he struggled to work through Memoirs. Ronnie Janoff-Bulman and most other experts on traumatic loss believe that individuals hold three basic assumptions in order to function: The world is benevolent, the world is meaningful, and the self is worthy (6). It is easy to see how these basic assumptions would tie in with the grieving process outlined above, even for someone as dissociated as Godwin, because these assumptions create a type of consonance that can be applied to any situation.

During traumatic loss, these basic assumptions are often shattered. This could possibly furnish another explanation, beyond his obvious narcissistic lack of empathy, why Godwin did not believe Memoirs had to hide any of Wollstonecraft’s actions. A benevolent world would look upon a grieving spouse with pity and understanding, and Godwin, as a public figure, would expect this to apply to him even more. The basic assumptions could also explain Godwin’s need for “accounting,” as Cynthia Richards puts it, for Wollstonecraft’s life (584-585). In writing Memoirs, Godwin was creating order and meaning in the world, and the meaningful world allows Godwin to keep his assumptions intact. One can imagine what happened to Godwin’s carefully constructed assumptions with the backlash over Memoirs, which I believe caused him to analyze his
own character as noted above. First and foremost, the world was no longer a benevolent place for Godwin, and one could argue, the world would never again in actuality be benevolent to Godwin given his lack of reputation to this day. Jeffrey Kauffman explains that most people will sacrifice the third assumption, that the self is worthy, in order to keep their primary assumptions about the world around them in place (209-10). Godwin, given his narcissism, would choose one of the other two assumptions to sacrifice instead of sacrificing the self. A philosopher like Godwin would find it difficult to totally release the idea that the world was meaningful. Godwin’s career had been built upon that very assumption. However, if one reads the project Godwin began after Memoirs, the novel St Leon, as being somewhat autobiographical, which many critics do, one can make the argument that Godwin is trying to recapture the idea that the world has meaning through his fiction. It might also reveal that Godwin’s sense of self did not escape Wollstonecraft’s death unscathed, and I believe that Godwin’s “Analysis of Personality” supports this idea. Daniel Liechty believes: “This willingness to judge oneself as evil or unworthy, and therefore deserving of what fate has delivered, is noted as often as any phenomenon in the clinical literature. It may be the closest thing we have to a human psychological constant and illustrates the depths of the human need to maintain and protect structures of collective and cultural meaning in human life,” even if it seems like a Pyrrhic victory to outsiders (84). Of course, Leichty is speaking of individuals in a modern world, people who can take the structure of their world for granted (85). In 1798, Godwin and England as whole were not in possession of solid “modern” structures of collective and cultural meaning. Politically, economically, and socially, Godwin’s world was in chaos. The aftermath of the French Revolution, the growing sense of nationality,
and near continual state of war—not to mention the illness of George III—meant that nothing in England could be taken for granted or considered stable. Even an optimist would have a difficult time finding signs of benevolence in Godwin’s world so the assumption that the world is benevolent may have been easier for Godwin to sacrifice in 1798 than Leichty believes. Indeed, this appears to be the assumption that Godwin allows to shatter in order to bring his world back into cognitive consonance and to keep from having to let go of his emotional control. In the letter Godwin wrote to Alderson on 23 October 1797, just forty three days after Wollstonecraft’s death, he states: “Be sure I am not the fool to look for that happiness in any future vicissitude of life, that I was beginning to enjoy, when I was thus dreadfully deprived of it” (GL 258). Godwin tells Charlotte Smith: “I partook of a happiness, by so much the more exquisite, as I had a short time before, had no conception of it, or scarcely admitted its possibility, & saw one bright ray that streaked my day of life, only to leave the remainder more gloomy, & (the truest sense of the word hope) hopeless” (GL 263).

After Memoirs, Godwin was able to go on with his life, despite his confusion over the book’s unpopularity and the backlash it created. Soon after Memoirs was completed, Godwin was out and about, socializing and working towards his political goals. Godwin remarried in 1801 and appears to have been as enamored of the new Mrs. Godwin, previously Mary Jane Clairmont, as he had been of Wollstonecraft. Letters Godwin and Mary Jane exchanged are evidence of this. Mary Wollstonecraft’s specter/character continued to surface in Godwin’s fiction after Memoirs, as it does in St Leon, but she appears to have been consigned to Godwin’s fictional realm. The only other non-fiction work that referenced their relationship in even a vague manner, although it does not name
Wollstonecraft, is Godwin’s “Essay on Sepulchers.” All of this suggests that *Memoirs* was indeed successful as scriptotherapy. In fact, given the emotional limitations of Godwin’s psyche, the distance he was able to create between himself and Wollstonecraft in *Memoirs* may have been what allowed Godwin to move on. However successful Godwin was in his mourning, his narcissism and his dissociation from emotion would have an indelible impact on the two young girls Wollstonecraft left behind, a fatal impact on Fanny, and help Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley pen one of the most advanced case studies of victimology ever written—*Frankenstein*. 
Chapter Three

Victimizers and Victimization in *Frankenstein*: Mary Shelley’s Transformation of Personal Trauma into Eternally Relevant Public Drama

When Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s (M. Shelley) first novel, *Frankenstein*, was revealed to be the work of a young woman, contemporary reviewers were astounded that a female, especially one so young, could conceive of such a plot. Many even believed that Percy Bysshe Shelley (P.B. Shelley), M. Shelley’s husband, was the true author.\(^1\)

However when one examines M. Shelley’s biography through a trauma lens, the number of traumatic relationships and losses M. Shelley experienced in the years leading to *Frankenstein* and its publication, one can see that M. Shelley had enough experience as both victim and (unwitting) victimizer to enable her to recreate the two as characters in her novel. More importantly, I believe, it is because of her personal experience, that M. Shelley was able to create characters that stand up to modern psychological and sociological scrutiny. Elisabeth Bronfen argues that one cannot look at *Frankenstein* without examining M. Shelley’s biography because “the issue of biography” is something that “should not be located outside the text but also be sought internal to its structure” so it is important to discuss some significant events in M. Shelley’s early life (18).

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\(^1\) When working with the Godwins and Shelleys, names are always an issue because so many of them repeat. To avoid confusion and to keep from having to identify them by their full names each time they are mentioned, I have decided to keep to last names and first initials when needed. Because Mary Shelley was actually Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin prior to her marriage and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley by the time *Frankenstein* was published, she will be simply M. Shelley in the text. Mary Wollstonecraft will be referred to by her maiden name to avoid confusion, and Percy Bysshe Shelley will always be identified by his first initials and last name.
Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley as Victim and Victimizer

As noted before, M. Shelley was born in 1797 to the radical authors William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft who had married in March of that year. Just twenty days after M. Shelley’s birth, her mother was dead. As many scholars including Anne Mellor and Emily Sunstein point out, both family friends and public detractors always identified M. Shelley with her mother. I believe that M. Shelley’s inner-narrative, her inner concept of who she was as a person, was bound up with her mother’s identity from such an early age that M. Shelley could not think of herself without being reminded of her mother and, by extension, her mother’s death. Although no one would ever blame M. Shelley for Wollstonecraft’s death, M. Shelley came into the world at the cost of her mother’s life. Therefore she was, from birth, an inadvertent victimizer and was forever reminded that because of her, the world lost a bright and shining mind. As a motherless child and as an emotional orphan, M. Shelley’s status is the foundation of her identity as both a person and a writer. This is important because as Paul John Eakin reminds us:

“The source of our narrative identities, [Chaloupka, Foucault, and Shotter] propose, is not some mysterious interiority, but other people” (25). The most common contributor to a child’s sense of narrative identity is the parent. Eakin explains, “‘memory talk,’ [the] homely little stories that parents and caregivers [tell children] coach us to tell about ourselves,” and children learn through these “memory talks” what structure their personal narrative should take (25). Based upon this finding and the way that Godwin attempted to include Wollstonecraft in Shelley’s life, through graveside stories and visits, it is improbable that M. Shelley could conceive of a self-identity or self-narrative that did not
include her as a motherless daughter and as a daughter who had caused her mother’s early death. In fact, M. Shelley was taught to read from the letters on her mother’s grave, a tale Mary Lamb faithfully reproduced as Elizabeth Villiers’ story in *Mrs. Leicester’s School* (Sunstein 26; Lamb 7). Jungian theorist Susan Kavaler-Adler believes that women “who have suffered early trauma in relation to the mother,” for example losing their mothers as a children, cannot accept the substitution “by the father for the missing maternal experience” (Kalsched 136). Godwin’s own lack of empathy made him a particularly poor substitute for M. Shelley.

Sunstein points out how often M. Shelley was separated from those she cared about during her early childhood, which would certainly have caused some trauma and anxiety for the toddler (24, 32). At one point when Godwin took a vacation, the three-year-old Mary worried that he had given her to her babysitters (26). One of the most frightening changes for the young girl would have been in 1801 when William Godwin remarried. Shelley’s new stepmother, Mary Jane Clairmont Godwin (Mrs. Godwin), brought with her two children, Charles and Jane, who later changed her name to Claire, and M. Shelley’s life and her position in the Godwin household were forever changed. As Harriet Devine Jump pointed out, Mrs. Godwin did not marry into an easy situation, and Sunstein explains, “Mrs. Godwin’s anxiety about money brought out the worst in her” (Jump 304-05, 307, Sunstein 31). Mrs. Godwin, probably as an attempt to establish herself in the household and possibly to help with the spare finances, dismissed M. Shelley’s caregivers (Sunstein 32). In addition, M. Shelley now had to compete with three other individuals for her father’s attention. Again given Godwin’s lack of empathy and his narcissistic focus, M. Shelley would not have been able to count on her father’s
support for any grievances small or large—leaving her adrift in this new situation. In addition, M. Shelley idolized her father, and Godwin showed favoritism towards her, when she was behaving in a manner of which he approved. When M. Shelley acted out, Godwin, according to Sunstein, chose to punish her with “cold silent disapprobation” and “spoke only to give her orders until she made a heartfelt contrition” (43). Godwin’s coldness is readily apparent in his letters to the adult Shelleys, and it is telling that in 1848 M. Shelley burned those letters that would show Godwin at his worst (Sunstein 377).

Certainly by the time M. Shelley was thirteen, the tension between herself and Mrs. Godwin was so pronounced that Godwin could not ignore it. In 1811 when M. Shelley developed an infection in her writing hand, she was sent to Bath to board and take a water cure by herself for eight months and then on to Scotland to live with friends of Godwin after a brief return home. To make the girl feel more isolated, Godwin would not write or visit because he was punishing M. Shelley for an outburst against Mrs. Godwin. While M. Shelley was at Ramsgate in Bath, Godwin wrote to Mrs. Godwin, not his daughter, and requested Mrs. Godwin “[t]ell Mary that, in spite of unfavourable appearances, I still have faith that she will become a wise and, what is more, a good and happy woman” (qtd in Sunstein 55). For M. Shelley, this separation would have been doubly traumatic. First, the doctors were concerned that she might lose the use of her hand, which for someone whose identity was tied up with authorship, meant that her future was uncertain for the first time in her short life. Secondly, M. Shelley was facing these fears alone, without the support of the father who meant so much to her or even her sister to talk to.
Donald Kalsched’s experience with female patients who have lost their mothers is particularly enlightening in this situation. Kalsched has observed that these women tend “toward addictions to existing inner-paternal objects” which often leads to “especially refractory forms of transference addiction” (136-37). This helps explain why M. Shelley spent so much of her life focused on her father and his wants rather than her own. It would also explain why Godwin’s silence was “one of the few things that could make her cry” (Sunstein 43). However, this silence would also create cognitive dissonance, as discussed in the previous chapter, for M. Shelley as she attempted to reconcile the father she loved dearly and the father who could cut off communications for months and years. For an adolescent who is trying to establish an identity, M. Shelley was doubly stripped of hers as both a writer and as a best-loved daughter. For the first time in her life, M. Shelley was forced to look outside her family for support and friendship.

Nearly two years passed before M. Shelley returned from her exile in Scotland, with a fully healed hand, and she formed her attachment to the older and married P. B. Shelley within months of her return. I want to stress that M. Shelley had been essentially without any family support for that time. I believe that, although the Baxter family in Scotland loved and supported her, she returned to the Godwins feeling like an outcast, supplanted by both Mrs. Godwin and William Godwin Jr.—who was encouraged to perform for guests at a miniature pulpit and often performed pieces written by M. Shelley. In essence it was an emotionally starved sixteen-year-old girl and one who felt like an outsider in her own family who fell prey to P. B. Shelley that spring.

P. B. Shelley was five years older than Mary and already the father of a young girl, and in many ways, he was a younger version of the idealized Godwin as Sunstein,
Anne K. Mellor, and Betty T. Bennett have shown. Not only did P. B. Shelley consider himself a disciple of Godwin and Wollstonecraft, P. B. Shelley was a visionary himself. P. B. Shelley’s personality would have been one with which M. Shelley would have felt familiar. When looking at the relationship between the two young lovers, one must take into consideration P. B. Shelley’s already well-established pattern of finding young, emotionally vulnerable girls and weaving a story for them, casting himself as a physically delicate, unloved, and misunderstood martyr-in-the-making who was searching for his soul mate—a perfect enticement for adolescent females of any century. Additionally, P.B. Shelley was able to convince himself (and the girls) that he was a Knight in Shining Armor, who was there to rescue the girl from an untenable situation—be it school, parental rules, or an archaic marriage system. P. B. Shelley had already used this persona in his pursuit of Harriet Westbrook, who would become his first wife; to form an attachment to Elizabeth Hitchner, who was a young teacher Shelley invited to live with him; and to entice Cornelia Turner, the married daughter of his hostess in Bracknell while Harriett lived with her sister and P.B. Shelley’s young daughter eight miles away (Bieri 156, 170, 268). P. B. Shelley would use this tactic after his marriage to M. Shelley to begin affairs with Claire Clairmont and Jane Williams and probably also used this initially with Emilia Viviani (Bieri 585; Sunstein 193-94). Although neither of the Shelleys considered P. B. Shelley’s behavior in this light, he was acting in a predatory manner, choosing, for the most part, extremely young, cloistered females—females who were still considered children even in the nineteenth century. One of the aspects that appears to have attracted P.B. Shelley to both Harriet and M. Shelley was their malleability. I find the evidence for this in the scholarly program he set for both of his
wives. For M. Shelley, this was some of the same instruction that she had received from her beloved father before she was set adrift and would have helped her transfer that adoration to P. B. Shelley. The most interesting evidence for M. Shelley’s malleable personae at this point in her life is given by Betty Bennett, who noted, “[h]andwriting also offers important information about Mary Shelley’s life. Her earliest found writing resembles Godwin’s. After her elopement with P. B. Shelley, her script looks more and more like his, to the degree that sometimes it seems impossible to know which of the two Shelleys wrote a particular word or phrase” (219-20). M. Shelley actually took on one of the attributes of the two major male figures in her life—their style of handwriting.

When P. B. and M. Shelley ran away to France, Claire in tow, Godwin cut off all ties with his daughter and did not renew them until after the Shelleys were legally married more than three years later. Because of this separation, M. Shelley’s personal identity shifted. As Bronfen points out M. and P. B. Shelley became more invested in the early texts of Godwin and Wollstonecraft, “Godwin and Wollstonecraft as texts are thus transformed into figures of the all-sufficient father and mother they never were in life (due to the restrictions exerted by the former and the early death of the latter)” (17). As the young couple became more invested in the texts, they took an unusual step: they choose to live out the philosophies of Mary’s parents. Bronfen calls it “a far more radical transformation of theory into practice” and explains:

The relationship between Mary and Percy not only imitates the parents’ but transforms into lived reality what they merely intellectually conceived as a possibility. In fact, shortly before her suicide in 1816, Harriet Westbrook, who had remained Percy’s wife throughout, attributed her
husband’s infidelity to his reading of Godwin’s Enquiry; “the very great evil that book has done,” she wrote, “is not to be told.” (orig. emphasis, 24)

Because Mary and P.B. Shelley were following the philosophies set out by her parents, they were able to justify, or as Bronfen says to “legitimize,” their actions—if only to themselves (24). For M. Shelley, the silence of Godwin took an immense emotional toll. On the day the two eloped, 28 July 1814, Godwin abruptly stops mentioning P. B. Shelley’s name in his journal—a name that had been a daily fixture for months—ending with the note “Five in the morning,” the time Mary and Claire left with P. B. Shelley (Diary, http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk). The Bodleian electronic transcription project of William Godwin’s diaries notes that P. B. Shelley was mentioned in Godwin’s diary ninety four times in 1814, the majority of which were before the elopement; Godwin only mentions him five times after the elopement and these denote letters or times when P. B. Shelley attended meetings to help negotiate an influx of capital in return for half of the Skinner Street business. Godwin notes a letter from P. B. Shelley on 16 September and begins noting “Jane” for Claire again on 2 August with the note that Godwin wrote her a letter. P.B. Shelley is mentioned fifteen times in 1815, two of which were meetings between the two men. In the year 1816, P. B. Shelley is mentioned fifty-one times, four of which were meetings before the marriage of P. B. and M. Shelley (Diary). The next time M. Shelley is mentioned again is a notation on 24 December, six days before the day she was married to P.B. Shelley (Diary). Godwin notes that he wrote a letter to “MWG,” and the first time Godwin meets his daughter in person again is the 28 December 1816, two days before he stood as a witness to her marriage (Diary). M.
Shelley was not allowed access to the family house until the night before her wedding, 29 December 1816, when she was invited to dine with her family (Diary).

Two sources tell the story of the elopement from the Godwins’ point of view. The first is a slim, privately printed volume that is supposed to be the transcription of a letter from William Godwin to John Taylor that was written on 27 August 1814. The transcriber, H. Buxton Forman, is extremely sympathetic to the young runaways and hostile towards Godwin. At one point before he gives the transcription, Forman says: “The fundamental facts as to persons and dates may be taken as fairly accurate; but the color insidiously thrown upon the whole story for Godwin’s own purposes is so managed as to give the narrative the character of something uncommonly like arrant perfidy” (6). The other documents are a series of letters supposedly written by Mary Jane Godwin to Lady Mountcashell in August 1814. However, these letters are only found in Edward Dowden’s biography of P. B. Shelley, and Dowden himself explained that he only ever saw copies of the letters made by Claire Clairmont (541). These letters present all sorts of false information and dates, and everywhere in the letters that Mrs. Godwin mentions her daughter, she is denoted as “Claire.” The problem with this is that Mrs. Godwin never called Claire anything other than “Jane” (Dowden 542). Dowden surmises that Claire made the changes when she copied the letters, and the question arises of what other changes she may have made (541). Claire Clairmont saw herself as M. Shelley’s rival for P. B. Shelley’s love for part of their adulthood. At the time Dowden was writing the biography, at the end of Claire’s life, Claire may have wanted Dowden and Lord and Lady Shelley to see her as someone sympathetic to their cause. Ultimately, because of the motivation of the writers and transcribers, it is difficult to tell what, if anything, is
absolute truth. However, the letters do provide some insight into what was a difficult situation for everyone involved, and the Godwins and P. B. Shelley are illuminated with an unflattering light throughout the narratives.

The Lady Mountcashell letters are the closest to a complete narrative of the elopement that exists and illustrate some of the pressure sixteen-year-old M. Shelley was under. The narrative states that P. B. Shelley’s fixation with Mary was noted by Godwin and that he felt the need to speak to P. B. Shelley about it; “[s]hortly after, Harriet Shelley came up from Bracknell” to speak to the Godwins alone. According to Mrs. Godwin, Harriet “was very much agitated, and wept, poor dear young lady, a great deal because Mr. Shelley had told her yesterday at Bracknell that he was desperately in love with Mary Godwin” (qtd in Dowden 543). The Godwins then confronted Mary, who “behaved as well as possible—approved our renouncing his acquaintance, and wrote a few lines to Harriet to pray her not to be unhappy, as she would not see Mr. S------ again” (543-44). Godwin then wrote to P. B. Shelley. After a week of “tranquility, ” P. B. Shelley burst into the shop when Godwin was away. Mrs. Godwin says she “entreated him not to enter” and that P. B. Shelley looked “extremely wild” (544). According to the narrative, P. B. Shelley pushed Mrs. Godwin away from the door to Mary’s schoolroom “with extreme violence,” walked “to Mary” and addressed her: “They wish to separate us, my beloved; but Death shall unite us.” (544). Then P. B. Shelley supposedly gave M. Shelley a bottle of laudanum telling her that she could use it to “escape from tyranny” while he showed her a pistol that he explained would allow him to join her in death (544). M. Shelley and a Mr. Marshall worked to calm P. B. Shelley. Mrs. Godwin believed that it was Mary’s entreaties that had the calming effect: “She told us afterwards she believed
she said to him, ‘I won’t take this laudanum; but if you will only be reasonable and calm, I will promise to be ever faithful to you.’ This seemed to calm him, and he left the house, leaving the phial of laudanum on the table” (544). The next week, the Godwins were “awakened at midnight by the violent ringing of the bell” (544). P. B. Shelley’s landlord told the Godwins that P. B. Shelley “had taken a violent dose of laudanum” (544). The Godwins rushed to P. B. Shelley’s rooms and helped the doctor care for him and then hired a couple to “keep watch” (544). Added to this melodramatic narrative is Dowden’s foot note from an interview with Claire Clairmont: “Miss Clairmont stated that she accompanied Mary to Chapel Street on a visit to Harriet, and that she heard Mary assure Harriet that she would not think of Shelley’s love for her. Shelley’s threat of suicide, says Miss Clairmont, overcame Mary’s resolution” (544). Mrs. Godwin explains, “I think Mary must have written and found means of conveying some note to [P. B. Shelley], for his spirits rose, and he said he should not attempt his life again” (qtd in Dowden 545).

Three weeks after the suicide attempt, the lovers left for France. While no one can really say if these events actually occurred as portrayed, what is evident is the immense amount of pressure that was being placed on the sixteen-year-old from both her family and her future spouse. This was not a case where M. Shelley just slipped away in the middle of the night with P. B. Shelley and Claire with no one around her aware of the relationship. While this narrative paints P. B. Shelley as a master manipulator, Godwin’s own letter shows his lack of both sympathy or empathy for his daughter and the predicament in which she found herself.

Godwin tells John Taylor that it was on 26 June 1814 that P. B. Shelley “accompanied Mary, & her sister, Jane Clairmont, to the tomb of Mary’s mother” and
that is here that “it seems the impious idea first occurred to him of seducing her, playing the traitor to me, & deserting his wife” (Foreman 11). Godwin then tells his creditor that on the “6th of July,” after Shelley’s post obit loan came through, of which Godwin and his creditors received £500; P. B. Shelley “had the madness to disclose his plans to me & to ask my consent” (Bieri 262; Forman 11). Godwin tells Taylor that P. B. Shelley “promised to give up his licentious love, & return to virtue” after Godwin “expostulated with him with all the energy of which I was master” (11). Godwin then turned to Mary and “applied all my diligence to waken up a sense of honor & natural affection in the mind of Mary, & I seemed to have succeeded,” but “[t]hey both deceived me” (11).

Tellingly, Godwin says that “Mary and her sister Jane escaped from my house” on the 27th (emphasis added, 11). Godwin swings back and forth between two stands in his letter. He portrays P. B. Shelley’s marriage to Harriet as a happy one on the one hand, which would seem to portray M. Shelley as a seductress, who caused P. B. Shelley to fall in so love with her during one walk to her mother’s grave that he was willing to forsake his wife and child. On the other hand, Godwin tells Taylor that he was in the process of arranging for M. Shelley to leave the household (again) when the couple ran off. Godwin explains that it was necessary to remove the girl because of “the violence of Shelley’s temper” and because Godwin was “far from certain what scenes he [P. B. Shelley] might be capable of acting” (12). In many ways, this letter would corroborate Dowden’s account, although without the details. Godwin’s letter does show that P. B. Shelley was capable of enacting scenes to obtain his desired outcome, but Godwin’s letter is disturbing because of the light in which he portrays his daughter. After telling Taylor about the “catastrophe” with the girls, Godwin launches into a plea for £200 of financial
help (15). The strangest part of the letter is that Godwin says he has “many enemies” and may be “in need of vindication” so he enclosed copies of letters he wrote to P. B. Shelley and two accounts of the “tale” one “in the handwriting of Charles Clairmont and the second of Jane” (15). Supposedly these letters are “the only copies” the Godwins possess so he requests Taylor return the letters but asks that “a copy of each should remain in [Taylor’s] possession” and that Taylor’s daughter Sarah make the copies (15-16). This is almost as if the Godwin is willing to give the Taylors an exclusive insight to the story of the scandal in return for the loan; although, Godwin repeatedly asks that the Taylors keep the letters in their confidence. The strange notation of the letters is followed by a new paragraph that begins abruptly with a change of subject and reads:

When I use the word stigma, I am sure it is wholly unnecessary to say that I apply it in a very different sense to the two girls. [Godwin had used the word in the previous paragraph to explain why he was not publishing the tale.] Jane has been guilty of indiscretion only, & has shown a want of these filial sentiments, which it would have been most desirable to us to have discovered in her: Mary has been guilty of a crime. (emphasis added, 16)

It is interesting that Godwin accuses M. Shelley of the crime—not P. B. Shelley. This may explain why Godwin did read letters from P. B. Shelley and continued to meet with him to get financial support. But what exactly was Mary’s crime? Is it that she led a married man astray, as the letter seems to hint? Is it that she included Claire in her schemes? Or is it that Mary chose P. B. Shelley over Godwin? Godwin’s narcissistic personality and the focus of the letter makes it likely that he considered the latter the
crime. His letter shows that he is extremely concerned about how the younger generation’s actions will reflect back upon him and his growing debts. The sentence that mentions the enclosed letters may also help shed some light on a comment that Mrs. Godwin made to Lady Mountcashell: “it was reported about town [as told by Harriet Shelley] that Godwin has sold the two girls to Shelley—Mary for £800 and Claire for £700” (Dowden 546). Again, there is mention of Godwin’s debts and P. B. Shelley’s payment for them in close proximity—Mrs. Godwin notes that “Shelley’s solicitor, has written to say that he had had a letter from Shelley, begging him to pay a debt of Godwin’s—£200—coming due on December 1, which Shelley had promised to meet” (546). Dowden then notes that the Godwins “wished to refuse” but on the advice of acquaintances, accepted, “although it humbles Godwin’s pride” (546). There are two items of interest in this note. The first is that Harriet Shelley purportedly brings the rumor to the Godwins’ attention (and also purportedly refutes it) and that the amount of debt that is mentioned as being paid by P. B. Shelley’s solicitor is the same amount that Godwin asked for from Taylor, after providing the evidence of what happened. Most of all, what comes through the letter is that Godwin is willing to sacrifice his relationship with his daughter to save his reputation (and punish her) but is not willing to sacrifice his attachment to P. B. Shelley’s potential for future income. Like M. Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, Godwin’s work and reputation were more important to him than the fate of his offspring, a young girl who was caught up in circumstances that were beyond her maturity.

The abandonment and anger caused another psychic trauma for M. Shelley, one that was translated into Frankenstein. Mellor notes: “As she wrote her novel, Mary
Shelley distanced herself from her originating dream identification with the anxious and reject ing parent and focused instead on the plight of the abandoned child. Increasingly she identified with the orphaned creature” (44). Mellor points out that Volume II contains the creature’s tale and is the volume in which “Mary Shelley spoke most directly in her own voice” (44). M. Shelley’s sense of alienation and abandonment by Godwin, who raised her unconventionally as an intellectual giant but like Victor Frankenstein, “never once considers how such a giant will survive among normal human beings” (42). Mellor considers this a “failure of empathy” on Victor’s part, and I believe the same failure must be attributed to Godwin (42). While the first exile from her father without contact may have surprised M. Shelley, she was most likely less surprised by her father’s reaction to her relationship with Shelley, having already experienced his emotional abandonment. However, that does not mean that it was any less traumatic or hurtful. Again, I reference the fact that M. Shelley felt the need to build a family bonfire of her letters and her father’s more severe correspondence. I will also point out the missing pages in M. Shelley’s journal, one of which, where the pages are missing for the end of April and beginning of May 1815, is followed by the intriguing statement “which is a striking example of the pomposity of the Skinner street proceedings” (sic 77). M. Shelley makes this statement during the time in which she was being ignored by her father but her lover and his financial potential are not. There is also the matter of the draft letter Godwin wrote years later to M. Shelley in Italy after the death of little William. In this letter, Godwin chastises his daughter for her grief “because a child of three years old is dead!” (Godwin’s Draft). The draft ends with Godwin, who was always more attentive to his own suffering than that of others, saying: “Remember too
that, though, at first, your nearest connections may pity you in this state, yet that when
they see you fixed in selfishness & ill humour, & regardless of the happiness of every one
else, they will finally cease to love you, & scarcely learn to endure you” (Godwin’s
Draft). A father who had never lost a toddler wrote this sage philosophical advice.
Godwin’s only experience with losing a child was the loss of Mary Jane’s baby right after
their marriage. Moreover, the man who wrote this bemoaned his every trial to
acquaintances in letters and expected sympathy (and money) in return. Yet, he tells his
daughter that persisting in her unjustified grief will cause her to lose the love of all those
who surround her—including presumably his love. Godwin set an example of paternal
love that is anything but unconditional; his love was only given under very exacting
conditions. It is no wonder that Victor Frankenstein is able to cut ties completely with
his creation; his only remorse in doing so appears to be how the creature affects his life.
Mellor believes that Godwin’s treatment resulted in the murder of William Frankenstein
in the novel: “Having felt rejected by her father, emotionally when he married Mary Jane
Clairmont and overtly when she eloped with Percy Shelley, Mary had long repressed a
hostility to Godwin that erupted in the murder of his namesake” (47). Mellor also
believes that M. Shelley was able to mine “her own buried feelings of parental
abandonment and forced exile from her father” in the scene where the creature questions
his existence and the lack of any others like him and in his longing to establish a
relationship with the De Laceys. Mellor comments “Mary Shelley was clearly drawing
on her own experiences of emotional isolation in the Godwin household”( 46, 45). As
Mellor illustrates, the sense of isolation that defines the creature can be found in M.
Shelley’s own life and relationship with her father, and it makes sense that she would use this to paint the extreme isolation of the creature.

Added to the emotional toll caused by the separation from M. Shelley’s family and the silence of Godwin was the physical strain of the Shelley’s vegetarian diet; they did not even use sugar or eat anything with sugar in it because of the role slaves played in sugar production. Soon M. Shelley added the physical and emotional strain of a pregnancy (Sunstein 104). We can assume that M. Shelley’s nutritional needs as an expectant mother were unmet during the group’s six-week-tour of Europe and even when they returned to England, destitute. Years later one of the reasons Byron refused to allow the Shelleys to take custody of Allegra was that he did not want Allegra “to perish of Starvation, and green fruit,” and commented that the Shelleys had been unable to successfully “rear” a child of their own, which, while unkind, was accurate (Byron 80). M. Shelley’s journals show that she was often ill during her pregnancy, and her first baby was probably born two months premature without hope for survival—adding another blow to M. Shelley’s seventeen-year-old psyche.

Like her creature, M. Shelley was denied acceptance by her family and denied the ability to create a family of her own. M. Shelley’s journal is filled with her grief for the next week; she uses phrases like “miserable day,” “not in good spirits,” and, three days after the baby’s death, “still thinking about my little baby—‘tis hard indeed for a mother to loose a child” (68). It is interesting that M. Shelley uses the word “still” just three days after the baby’s death. This implies that the others in the household felt that she should move forward. On the 13th of March, one week to the day M. Shelley found her baby dead, she writes: “stay at home net & think of my little dead baby—this is foolish I
suppose yet whenever I am left alone to my own thoughts & do not read to divert them they always come back to the same point—that I was a mother & am no longer” (69). The next week on Sunday, 19 March, M. Shelley records her famous dream of rubbing her baby until it comes back to life; the next day she notes “Dream again about my baby” (70-71). These are the last specific references to the child she lost, but for the rest of the journal, M. Shelley notes on many days that she did not feel well or woke late and especially notes the days that P. B. Shelley “procure[d] his son” from Harriet (76). M. Shelley still mourned the loss of her newborn, but she was not as vocal about her loss.

This traumatic loss resonates in *Frankenstein* as many scholars have noted, particularly Mellor, who argues that motherhood and the anxiety that attends it is central to *Frankenstein*: “One reason Mary Shelley’s story reverberates so strongly is because it articulates, perhaps for the first time in Western literature, the most powerfully felt anxieties of pregnancy” (41). Furthermore, Mellor believes: “Mary Shelley’s focus on the birth-process illuminates for a male readership hitherto unpublished female anxieties, fears, and concerns about the birth-process and its consequences. At the same time, her story reassures a female audience that such fears are shared by other women” (41). I would take this a step further and argue that in *Frankenstein*, M. Shelley was able to transcribe her grief and the anxiety of her first pregnancy and loss in a way that may have helped those males around her, particularly P. B. Shelley, understand why she was “still thinking about [her] little baby” and was not able to instantly move on from the child’s death—even though the child had not been expected to live (*Journal* 68). While M. Shelley was in mourning, she also attempted to reconcile herself to the idea that P. B. Shelley wanted her to become sexually involved with his friend Hogg and to the growing
closeness of P. B. Shelley and Claire—who was willing to provide a less-serious substitute for her grieving sister and accompany P. B. Shelley around London. At this point in her life, M. Shelley might have felt that nothing for which she stood and for which she had give up so much was stable or dependable. She began to focus on one thing that she could control—Claire’s living arrangements. M. Shelley was finally able to see Claire relocated on 12 May 1815—over a year later. M. Shelley was so happy about the cleansing and the renewal of her relationship with P. B. Shelley as a couple—rather than as part of a trio—that she noted in her journal: “I begin a new journal with our regeneration” (79). At the time of their “regeneration,” M. Shelley was pregnant again and gave birth a second time to William just eleven months after her first child was born. She was pregnant again, with Clara, while writing *Frankenstein*. All of these events played a part in creating the psyche of the young woman who first conceived of the novel *Frankenstein*; however, M. Shelley would undergo even more trauma before she finished the novel.

**The Case of Fanny Imlay Godwin**

Two events occurred between the initial idea for the novel and the completion of *Frankenstein* that would traumatize M. Shelley and haunt her psyche for the remainder of her life. The first event is the suicide of her older sister Fanny Imlay Godwin on 9 October 1816. As this was an extremely important traumatic event, it requires some discussion. Scholars generally use the adjective “poor” with Fanny’s name. Fanny was
the sister who did not rebel; she was the sister who always worked to make Godwin happy; she was the sister of whom the least was expected; and, I believe, the sister who was the least appreciated. If Fanny were a literary character, she would be a Cinderella whose fairy godmother forgot to appear. All the Shelley and Godwin biographers describe Fanny as the least attractive child and point out that the family’s only hope for her was a position with her Wollstonecraft aunts—there was never any thought of Fanny finding a spouse and having a family of her own. This is partially Godwin’s fault. Fanny’s illegitimacy was a well-established fact because Godwin wrote about it in his memoir of Wollstonecraft—another example of not giving any thought to the child his actions might affect. Fanny’s chances of establishing a family of her own ended before she could begin to comprehend what that would mean. In a family of exceptional children, Fanny appears to have faded into the woodwork.

In the compiled correspondence of the Godwin clan, there are only seven letters written by Fanny Imlay, two of which are her suicide notes, and it seems that she is begging pardon for something in each and every one. Knowing that Fanny committed suicide, it is impossible to read the letters without seeing signs of depression and low self-esteem. Fanny often writes of feeling unwell or a sense of torpor, and in the first surviving letter to M. and P.B. Shelley in Switzerland, she makes the statement: “I have determined never to live to be a disgrace to such a mother” after hearing about Wollstonecraft from George Blood (orig. emphasis, Clairmont Correspondence 49). It is an interesting way to phrase her sentiment. Fanny does not say that she will ensure that her life is not a disgrace; she says she has determined never to live to be a disgrace. In the same letter, Fanny gives evidence of her situation in the middle of a difficult family—
a family in which she forever has to choose a side. Fanny tells “Mary & Shelley” that she loves them for themselves and hints that Mary may have insulted her before the Shelley party left England: “Mary gave a great deal of pain the day I parted from you” (49). This is directly followed by an assertion of her small worth: “What ever faults I may have I am not sordid or vulgar” (orig. emphasis, 49). This assertion appears necessary because Mrs. Godwin told Fanny that she was “your laughing stock—and the constant beacon of your <riposte> satire” (sic, 49). Poor Fanny is stranded alone with the grumpy Godwins while her sisters are touring Switzerland, enjoying adventures, and meeting famous people; and it appears that Mrs. Godwin made Fanny believe that she was not invited to join them because she was too vulgar and sordid for their company. In Fanny’s letter to her sister written between July 29th and August 1st of 1816, she hints about her untenable circumstances in the Godwin household: “if you knew how I am harassed by a variety {of} trying circumstance’s I am sure you would feel for me” (sic 56). At the end of the letter, Fanny, who has said she has no head for business, suddenly launches into a detailed account of Godwin’s money issues. This sudden shift illustrates the awkward position that Fanny was in; she was used by Godwin to keep the Shelleys cognizant of his financial affairs—because Godwin was ignoring M. Shelley’s existence and could not address her directly. The tone of the letter shifts in the last two sentences of the letter. The first, obviously composed by Fanny alone says: “I am not well my mind always keeps my body in a fever. but never mind me— (sic, 59). The letter ends with a sentence that may have been dictated to Fanny because the tone shifts to formal “let me entreat you to consider seriously all that I have said concerning your father” (59). Fanny uses the word “father” here when she used “papa” throughout the rest of the letter;
I believe this is evidence dictation because the tone and sentence structure is so different from any of Fanny’s other sentences. As the financial tensions at Skinner Street rose, Fanny’s position as go-between became increasingly more awkward. In her September letter, Fanny explains that her aunts have “lost their little income from Primrose Street,” this may have signaled the end of the plan to place Fanny with her aunts, which was Fanny’s only hope of leaving the Godwins. Dowden quotes a Miss Hutton as saying that Fanny took her life because “Everina would not have Fanny with her” (51). At this point, Fanny was left with no choice but to mediate between Godwin and the Shelleys.

The discomfort this position causes Fanny is evident in her final existing letter to the Shelleys; the letter is an interesting mix of phrasing. It begins with a curiously formal and philosophical opening and then changes to Fanny’s more natural tone and phrasing. However, it appears that Fanny wrote the letter at the behest of Godwin because, although she uses the phrase “papa” for most of the letter, when she discusses Godwin’s creditor Fanny says he is “a person to whom Godwin is an entire stranger & from whom he can expect no mercy” (81). Fanny then tells her sister “you know he [Godwin] cannot write when pecuniary circumstance’s overwhelm him, you know that it is of the utmost consequence for his own and the world’s sake that he should finish his novel and is it not your and Shelley’s duty to consider these things? and to endeavor to prevent as far as lies in your power giving him unnecessary pain and anxiety” (orig. emphasis, 81). This letter’s tone, the shifting sentence structure, and the unusual vocabulary result in an uneven mix of sentences—some that sound like Fanny, even if she is defending Mrs. Godwin, and some that sound like they were dictated by or, at the very least, suggested by someone else. Fanny’s correspondence is no longer her own. One of the most
interesting pieces of this letter, and one that I believe points to the fact that it was written at the Godwins’ request, is that Fanny does not mention herself or how she has been feeling as her other letters do. Fanny is earning her keep at the Godwins by acting as their pecuniary agent. I believe this is one of the reasons that Fanny’s suicide note references “those persons who have hurt their health in endeavoring to promote her welfare;” there is a very good possibility that she is parroting words said to her on a regular basis as she was coerced into writing the Shelleys, yet again, about Godwin’s financial affairs. After all, the Godwins were putting themselves further in debt every time they purchased food, clothing, or anything else that Fanny used, and even if the Godwins did not remind Fanny, she knew that she did not have any blood ties to either of them. The very least Fanny could do to help earn her keep would be to write P. B. Shelley for Godwin. Of course this is speculation, although it is speculation that is shared by many scholars including Daisy Hay and Sunstein. Six days after this unusual letter was written, Fanny Imlay killed herself by overdosing on laudanum, leaving behind a note that explained: “I have long determined that the best thing I could do was to put an end to the existence of a being whose birth was unfortunate, and whose life has only been a series of pain” to the people who were hurting “their health endeavoring to promote her welfare” (86). As traumatic as Fanny’s death was for M. Shelley, I believe it was Godwin’s reaction to the death that made it even more traumatic.

Godwin chose not to identify or claim Fanny’s body because he did not want to be linked to the scandal of her death. Fanny was buried in a pauper’s grave as an unidentified corpse. In addition, the existing letter from Godwin to the Shelley household insisted that the Shelleys “[d]o nothing to destroy the obscurity she so much
desired, that now rests upon the event” (*Godwin’s Letter*). Godwin’s letter opens with the phrase “I did indeed expect it,” which leads one to wonder why Fanny was able to leave the household with money in her hand, a household where she had already told her sister that she “had not a sous of my own” (*Clairmont Correspondence* 59). Godwin’s extreme reaction to the potential scandal of the death, along with his acknowledgement that Fanny’s suicide was not unexpected, and his narcissistic focus make one think that he was actually relieved that Fanny was sensible enough to die in a town where the Godwins were not known. At the same time, her grieving sister was asked to “avoid anything that leads to publicity” including attempting to identify or claim Fanny’s body because Godwin insists that it was Fanny’s last wish. However, there is nothing other than one line of a letter Fanny wrote to support this, and the letter itself no longer exists. The line is quoted in Godwin’s letter: “I depart immediately to the spot from which I hope never to be removed” (*Godwin’s Letter*). As Godwin has already been shown to creatively edit circumstances to be most beneficial to him, it would be interesting to know why he did not quote any more of the letter and to know why that particular letter did not survive. Godwin told the Shelleys that: “We are at this moment in doubt whether during the first shock we shall not say that she is gone to Ireland to her aunt, a thing that had been in contemplation. Do not take from us the power to exercise our own discretion” (*Godwin’s Letter*). By taking the stance that Fanny was going to Ireland, the Godwins were actually erasing Fanny and her death from the family history. Marion Kingston Stocking points out that the Godwins were so effective in their campaign that Charles Clairmont, Fanny’s stepbrother, still did not know that Fanny had died almost a year later (87). Godwin’s explanation for the silence was that he had “most of all in
horror is the public papers;” therefore the Godwins “so conducted ourselves that not one person in our house has the smallest apprehension of the truth” (Godwin’s Letter). For M. Shelley, there was an echo of the complete erasure of Fanny’s life, anguish, and death in the way she was being ignored by Godwin—he did not address the letter he wrote about Fanny’s death to anyone, possibly to avoid addressing her directly.

Elizabeth Dolan has done an excellent job of tracing M. Shelley’s invisibility in the Godwin family as it appears in Frankenstein. However, I believe that some of the invisibility of the creature, especially a creature who had nothing but inherent goodness to offer the humans who could not see past the creature’s hideous façade, is a reflection of Fanny Imlay, who was never seen as anything other than plain Fanny. Hay speculates that M. Shelley felt remorse for Fanny’s death, especially as she had noted in her journal that Fanny’s final letter was “stupid” and because the two girls knowingly left Fanny behind when they fled with P. B. Shelley (Hay101; Journal 138). To support the idea of Fanny’s invisibility in the household, Hay points out that Fanny’s visit to Mary after the baby died was “insufficiently appreciated” and suggests that reason Fanny was unable to go to Ireland was the “result of Mary and Claire’s impropriety” (102). As evidence, Hay points to the longing in Fanny’s letters for news of the girls’ lives and details about Byron (102). Fanny is still on M. Shelley’s mind two months later, in December, possibly because of Harriet’s death, and in a letter to P. B. Shelley, M. Shelley bemoans her inability to offer a home to Fanny before then: “Poor dear Fanny if she had lived until this moment should would have been saved for my house would then be a proper asylum for her” (Letters 24). M. Shelley “drafted the first four chapters of Frankenstein at great speed” in the weeks after Fanny’s death, which Hay considers an effort by M. Shelley to
“distract” herself (103). However, I would argue that M. Shelley would have also mined her review of Fanny’s life and Fanny’s role in the Godwin family for material—material that became part of the characters of Elizabeth, Justine, and the creature. Dolan points out: “Mary Shelley recommends [in the novel] physical invisibility as a strategy for those who are culturally invisible. Cultural invisibility is caused not only by deformity, as in the creature’s case, but also by any circumstance in which being “marked” as different in some physically evident way marks one’s own experience of selfhood difficult to convey to others” (68). While this is true of M. Shelley’s life, it is also true of Fanny’s, and she should not be discounted as a source for the trauma of invisibility in the novel.

Before M. Shelley finished drafting her novel, she was also faced with the suicide of Harriet Shelley, who drowned herself in the Serpentine and who was pregnant at the time of her death. It is very difficult to tell what M. Shelley actually thought of Harriet’s death at the time because her journals and the letters in her hand that still exist are very nearly silent about the former Mrs. Shelley. Sunstein reads this silence as M. Shelley’s wish “to put Harriet out of her mind” (129). However, there is a plethora of evidence in M. Shelley’s later life that shows Harriet’s death was a recurrent guilt. I believe that it was always a part of M. Shelley’s psyche and that the lack of evidence is more because of Lord and Lady Shelley’s attempt to reframe the tragedy, the harried state of the household, and Claire’s impending delivery than because evidence did not exist. M. Shelley was forced to face her part in that guilt almost immediately as the Shelleys, now a married couple, were forced into court for custody of P. B. Shelley’s children with Harriet. In the legal brief for the case, a brief that M. Shelley read, there is a letter from P.B. Shelley to Harriet’s sister Eliza that says Eliza can “excusably” consider M. Shelley
“as the cause of your sister’s ruin” (PBS Letters I: 532). P. B. Shelley has, in his own letter, blamed M. Shelley for a part in Harriet’s death. Sunstein points out that M. Shelley’s “first confrontation with responsibility for Harriet’s death had come from him” (130). And, although the birth of Claire’s child, the court case, and the move to London may have pushed the event to the back of her mind for the moment, M. Shelley appears to have returned to Harriet every time she herself was struck with another tragedy. In 1839, M. Shelley wrote about Harriet in her journal: “Poor Harriet to whose sad fate I attribute so many of my own heavy sorrows as the atonement claimed by fate for her death” (560). The trauma of Harriet’s death appears in Frankenstein as a part of the character of Victor Frankenstein, who like M. and P. B. Shelley, in all he “did, he, at the time of doing it, believed himself justified in his own conscience” (M. Shelley Preface to Queen Mab, qtd in Sunstein 343).

The M. Shelley who completed Frankenstein in May of 1817 was a much different person, psychologically speaking, than the person who began the novel in the summer of 1816. After beginning the novel, M. Shelley faced the suicide of her sister Fanny and then Harriett’s suicide, dealt with Claire’s secret pregnancy and also faced P. B. Shelley’s inability to gain custody of his children with Harriet. M. Shelley would also have to consider the role she played in these events; it is clear that Harriet’s death in particular haunted M. Shelley for the remainder of her lifetime. In many ways, M. Shelley had lost much of her innocence by 1817 and was forced to see herself not only as a victim of a cruel fate, an evil stepmother, and a distant father but also as someone who was potentially monstrous herself. As many scholars have pointed out, M. Shelley’s trauma found its way into the novel in several forms whether consciously or not. Gary
Kelly notes “[v]ersions of Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, her parents, and members of their circles appear in [her] novels beginning with *Frankenstein*” and that “judgments and feelings that manifestly invoke autobiographical authority are scattered throughout the novels” (25). I believe it is this autobiographical authority that gives the characters in *Frankenstein* their lasting appeal. William Brewer notes: “Shelley’s characters are often motivated by impulses or feeling for which they cannot account” (34). In response, I contend that the characters, particularly in *Frankenstein*, cannot always account for their motivations because the author herself was working through traumatic feelings that she could not pinpoint at that time in her life. M. Shelley’s trauma resulting from her identity as both a victim and a victimizer are played out in the drama between Victor Frankenstein and the creature who are each, at times, the victim of the other character and who both bear responsibility as victimizers of other characters. Her unique understanding of victimology is apparent in a close reading of the 1818 text of *Frankenstein*.

**Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as a Study of Victimology**

Nearly a century before Mary Shelley published her groundbreaking novel *Frankenstein*, the word “victim” had been endowed with a new meaning according to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. In English, the word victim was first used exclusively to denote a living sacrifice to “some deity or supernatural power” (*OED*). In 1660, the *OED* added to the definition: “A person who is put to death or subjected to torture by another; one who suffers severely in body or property through cruel or oppressive
treatment;” and in 1718, “One who is reduced or destined to suffer under some oppressive or destructive agency” was added (OED). In 1764, the phrase “to fall victim to” was added to the English language. In short, the definition of the word “victim,” as we use it today, had acquired its meaning long before Mary Shelley put pen to paper and wrote a novel so full of victims and of people who victimize other characters that one is hard pressed to find anyone in the novel who does not fall into the category of victim or what would come to be called a “victimizer” in 1830—just before Mary Shelley radically revised her novel for republication (OED; Mellor 160).

Although the field of victimology, studying the psychological effects that result from a person becoming a victim of crime, is relatively new—OED places the first use of the term in 1958 but the field of study did not actually become robust until feminist scholars began to use the term in the 1970’s—it does not mean that victims were invisible or did not exist before someone thought to make a study of them. The field of victimology owes a large debt to literature for its knowledge. In the book Victimization of the Weak, Jacqueline Scherer explains that when looking at the broader picture of victims, victimologists “turn to the reservoir of human wisdom to be found in the humanities, art, and religion” all of which increase “our understanding of victim phenomena” because “the cultural heritage nurtured within the humanities provides an opportunity for in-depth reassessing of concepts in order to renew their meaning” (11-12). Scherer encourages the “juxtaposition of the humanities and social sciences” in order to generate a “genuinely humanistic conception of personhood,” something she believes is essential to the social sciences (12). In Scherer’s view, the “Romantic sentimentalization of the culture and language” were necessary to shift the concept of
“victim” to the usage of the word today (14). Scherer goes on to say: “Writers and poets are often on the cutting edge of human understanding and have been able to arouse a collective sense of responsibility and remorse for victims. They make us aware that we are not totally innocent” (25). Maurice F. Brown is more explicit about the connection of literature to the study of victimology in his essay “Literature: A Third Eye on Victims.” Speaking from a literary perspective, Brown proclaims: “I am oppressed by the voluminous data of victimology in literature. Can you think of a single work in the Western literary tradition that does not have a victim or a potential victim in it? Victimology criticism, direct and oblique, from Aristotle to the present is extensive” (251). Brown believes students of victimology should study texts with a third, critical, eye that can tell “a great deal about societal attitudes to victimization and real or imagined agents of oppression in our society” (252). Brown concludes his essay by saying: “I regard literature itself, not theory, as the basic human data,” adding as an aside that he hopes “the individual human being, not the theory, is the ultimate reality” for those who are interested in victimology (271). Victimologists and other scholars who study trauma, such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, do not believe that it is ahistorical to look to literature of the past in order to find evidence of victimization that the world was not able to label appropriately until the twentieth century.

Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein is a perfect example of the data of which Brown speaks. Human suffering and misery at the hands of oppressors is rampant in the novel. Some characters are victims of an insidious type of victimization rather than more overt victimization, for example the victims of violence at the hands of the creature. Some characters are victims of both. One fascinating aspect of the novel is that the majority of
victims, excluding Justine, do not portray themselves as victims in their speech; in contrast, Victor Frankenstein and the creature bemoan their fate as victims and sometimes as victimizers. Beginning with examples of subtle victimization in the novel and ending with the more overt victimization, Mary Shelley provides a full tapestry of subjects and situations for the victimologist to study.

**The Insidious Victimization of Elizabeth and Justine**

One of the subtest types of victimization is that which Maria Root and Laura S. Brown call “insidious trauma,” the trauma of living under conditions that, while “not overtly violent” or physically dangerous, “can do violence to the soul and spirit” (L. Brown 107). In the essay “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,” Brown uses the modern day example of women living under the threat of rape. While the probability of rape has not risen significantly, women’s knowledge of their vulnerability to rape has risen with public campaigns for safety and awareness. Women who have not actually been raped are traumatized just by knowing the high probability of rape in society and because, frequently, they know someone who has been assaulted. This is known as lateral transmission of trauma (L. Brown 107). While insidious trauma may not appear to apply to the Frankenstein women at first, if one substitutes the fear of living destitute, cut off from society and their well-guarded social status for the fear of rape, one quickly sees how this would be applicable to the novel. The portrait of Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein represents the daily exposure to this fear. The portrait
“represented Caroline Beaufort in an agony of despair, kneeling by the coffin of her dead father. Her garb was rustic and her cheek pale; but there was an air of dignity and beauty, that hardly permitted the sentiment of pity” (Shelley 49).

In Victor Frankenstein’s description of the portrait, the themes are subtly reinforced. Victor first states that he “gazed upon the picture of his mother, which stood over the mantelpiece” and was “painted at my father’s desire” (49). However, when Victor describes the actual picture, the subject becomes “Caroline Beaufort” not “my mother” (49). The weeping, destitute pauper in “rustic garb” is someone other than Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein, the well-to-do, fashionable woman who was married to Victor’s father (49). The person in the picture is the Caroline Beaufort that would have been if Mr. Frankenstein had not rescued her from poverty and misfortune. Victor does not give a clear timeline for the painting’s creation so one is left to wonder for whom the message of the painting is meant and why Mr. Frankenstein chose that moment to immortalize. If the painting was commissioned at the beginning of Mr. Frankenstein’s and Caroline’s marriage, it would have been a daily reminder to Caroline of her near brush with poverty and disgrace. At the same time, the portrait reminded Mr. Frankenstein of the heroic deed he accomplished when, out of “truest friendship” for his friend Beaufort, he rescued Caroline from poverty “like a protecting spirit to the poor girl” (18-19). Even if the painting was not commissioned until after Caroline’s death, the painting would be a daily reminder to the other two young, female orphans in the house, Elizabeth and especially Justine, that the same fate Caroline escaped so narrowly could in fact be their future. The portrait would subtly remind the young ladies of their place in society in general and the Frankenstein household specifically.
This message of male power is one that M. Shelley would have understood from studying her parents’ writings, particularly her mother’s, and from the actions of the males with whom she was most familiar, P. B. Shelley and Godwin. In the dedication to A Vindication of the Rights of Women, Wollstonecraft wrote of men using their supposed superior reasoning as a tool to keep women dependent:

Do you not act a similar part, when you force all women, by denying them civil and political rights to remain immured in their families groping in the dark? for surely sir you will not assert that a duty can be binding which is not founded on reason? If indeed this be their destination arguments may be drawn from reason: and thus augustly supported, the more understanding women acquire, the more they will be attached to their duty—comprehending it—for unless they comprehend it, unless their morals be fixed on the same immutable principle as those of man, no authority can make them discharge it in a virtuous manner. They may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect degrading the master and the abject dependent. (sic, x)

Clearly, Wollstonecraft understood the traumatic effects of a life lived in subjugation to another would have on the women of her time. M. Shelley, because of her circumstances up to and during the writing of Frankenstein, had an even more complete understanding of how little legal power she had in the relationship as daughter, lover, or spouse.

In the novel, both Elizabeth and Justine appear to take the portrait’s message to heart. Victor points out Elizabeth’s submissiveness in his first conversation with Walton
when he explains that, from an early age, Elizabeth “was docile and good tempered, yet gay and playful . . . no one could submit with more grace than she did to constraint and caprice. . . . I loved to tend on her, as I should a favourite animal” (Shelley 19-20).xi

Victor reduces Elizabeth to a beloved house pet rather than recognizing her as an equal, in the same way that the Godwin household viewed Fanny. Ironically after this speech, Victor adds: “Neither of us possessed the slightest pre-eminence over the other, the voice of command was never heard among us; but mutual affection engaged us all to comply with and obey the slightest desire of each other” (20). Victor’s self-absorption is evident in this passage. If Elizabeth is always the one to submit, the one whose job it is to intercede, and if Elizabeth is aware that it is her “gentle and affectionate disposition” that led the Frankenstein’s to betroth her to Victor, how equal is she really in that relationship? It is possible that Victor never heard the voice of command because it was his own voice. Even though Shelley takes pains to tell readers that Elizabeth’s “fortune is secured to her” by her father, in reality, Elizabeth is dependent on the Frankenstein’s good will for her house and sustenance until she comes of age (19). Elizabeth is also a part of what Diane Negra reminds us is Victor’s obsession with his childhood as an “idyllic wholeness” (195). As such, the real Elizabeth is buried under construction of Victor’s imagined childhood.

Elizabeth is the person to whom the Frankenstein males turn after Caroline’s death. Reminded of her duties by Caroline’s deathbed speech to “supply [Caroline’s] place” to the younger cousins, Elizabeth becomes the de facto female head of the house and takes on the running of a large household and assuaging the male Frankensteins’ grief (24). Victor, meanwhile, escapes to Ingolstadt with a glib comment: “The time at
length arrives when grief is rather an indulgence than a necessity…. My mother was dead, but we had still duties which we ought to perform” (25). It is interesting that Victor devotes only one paragraph to his mother’s death, especially in light of his later behavior and critics’ insistence that he is attempting to resurrect his mother with the creature. He explains: “Why should I describe a sorrow which all have felt and must feel?” (25). When compared to the lengthy wailing and bemoaning of his own state after the creature kills William and after Justine is executed, Victor seems able to marginalize his mother’s presence in his life quite easily. After all, Caroline only “partook of [their] enjoyments” while Mr. Frankenstein “directed [their] studies” (24). In other words, Caroline is not as important to Victor’s life goals as his father. Mary K. Patterson Thornburg points out that Victor, when telling Walton about his family, is “revising” his family to a “sugary, sentimental … family but unwittingly reveals details that are at odds with that appraisal” (96). To see the real Franksteins, one must look at their actions not the picture Victor attempts to paint.

Justine, the other orphan affected by the picture, is even more vulnerable to the message of the portrait. Unlike Elizabeth, Justine has no fortune awaiting her when she reaches her majority. Once Justine’s mother dies, she is totally dependent on the Franksteins for her well being. No matter how M. Shelley attempts to soften the effect, Justine is in service to the Frankenstein family as a caretaker for both Caroline and William. As a female orphan under their employ, Justine would have been the most vulnerable person in the house. In addition to her economic vulnerability, Justine came to the Frankenstein household as a victim of verbal abuse, at the very least, from her mother. In fact, Justine came to live with the family because Caroline was so upset by
Justine’s home life, as Elizabeth makes plain in her letter: “through a strange perversity, her mother could not endure her, and, after the death of M. Moritz, treated her very ill. My aunt observed this; and, when Justine was twelve years of age, prevailed on her mother to allow her to live at her house” (40). Elizabeth continues to say that the benefits Caroline gave to Justine, including an education “superior to that which she had at first intended” were “fully repaid” because Justine is “the most grateful little creature in the world” (40).

Justine is also reminded how tenuous her position is when her mother recalls Justine after the death of her siblings; Madame Moritz was convinced that her treatment of Justine caused the deaths of the other children. The grieving Justine replaces her “vivacity” with “softness and a winning mildness to her manners” and enters her mother’s home with an increased vulnerability (41). Justine is initially welcomed home by her mother; however, Madame Moritz soon lapses back into the textbook abuse cycle. The classic abuse cycles consists of episodes of abuse interspersed with episodes of remorse where the abuser begs the victim’s forgiveness only to begin the build up to the next abusive cycle. Over time, the intervals between the episodes decrease while the abusive episodes escalate in violence and last longer. Elizabeth describes it in terms more familiar to her century: “The poor woman [Madame Moritz] was very vacillating in her repentance. She sometimes begged Justine to forgive her unkindness but much oftener accused her [Justine] of having caused the deaths of her brothers and sister” (41). Justine is not able to return to the Frankensteins’ home until after the death of Madame Moritz. When one considers the fragile state of Justine’s psyche after returning from her family home and the continual accusations thrown at Justine from her mother, Justine’s
reactions when she is arrested for William’s murder begin to make more sense. Justine’s self-worth is tied into her position in the Frankenstein household, and Justine’s mother has already spent months accusing Justine of causing the deaths of her brothers and sisters when Justine was not even living under the family roof.

According to Robert Jay Lifton, who follows a Freudian model, a large part of trauma is “survivor’s guilt,” and I believe this is especially true for Justine’s character and can be attributed to M. Shelley’s own sense of guilt (Caruth 128-129). Survivor’s guilt occurs after the trauma is over. The survivor wonders why she was the one who was spared when so many others were not. This guilt and confusion combined with the grieving process leaves survivors adrift from “real life” and separated from their own emotions and those of other people and can even devolve into fugue states. Justine would have been under the influence of a triple dose of this guilt. Justine survived Caroline—a woman she so admired that Justine believes Caroline to be “the model of all excellence, and endeavoured to imitate her phraseology and manners” to the point where Justine reminds Elizabeth of Caroline (Shelley 40). In addition to Caroline, Justine survives all of her siblings—each of whom had more value to Justine’s mother than did Justine. Finally, Justine survives the death of sunny, spoiled, and much loved William—the joy of the Frankenstein household. Given what researchers now know of survivor guilt combined with the self-worth of an abused child, is it any wonder if Justine feels that she in some small way might have been responsible for William’s death? Even if she knows she is not guilty of murder, Justine would feel the intense grief and would be troubled by the idea that William, a much more worthy member of the household, is dead and yet she still lives. As Justine is mostly responsible for William’s care, Justine probably also feels
some guilt about being away from the home when William disappears. All of these considerations will limit her from staging a vehement protest that she is innocent of William’s death, if not guilty of his murder.

Justine’s testimony at the trial and her final words to the courtroom are, therefore, necessarily self-defeating. She explains her actions the day of William’s disappearance and the morning after his body was found but undermines her own statements by telling the courtroom that she has no way of explaining how the miniature came to be in her pocket. Not only does Justine say that she cannot explain it, she proceeds to refute any reason that may have been found by the court on her behalf saying: “I have no enemy on earth, and none surely would have been so wicked as to destroy me wantonly. Did the murderer place it there? I know of no opportunity afforded him for so doing; or if I had, why should he have stolen the jewel, to part with it again so soon?” (53). By disproving any sort of mitigating circumstance before it can be imagined, Justine leaves no excuse by which the court might find her innocent. In addition, Justine leaves the bench convinced of her sentence before the court has even decided. Justine tells the judges: “I see no room for hope” (53). She then asks that the judges listen to some character witnesses, almost as a formality, saying: “if their testimony shall not overweigh my supposed guilt, I must be condemned, although I would pledge my salvation on my innocence” (53). Justine actually tells the court that they must condemn her if character witnesses do not outweigh physical evidence. It is notable that not one of the Frankenstein males speaks up as a character witness. The only family member to speak in Justine’s defense is Elizabeth, the one family member who has little to no political or legal power. Justine’s psychological victimization at the hands of her mother, and the
insidious victimization in the Frankenstein household have led her to believe that she is not worthy of redemption.

While insidious victimization can, at first, appear to be a minor issue in the novel, one can trace the effect of the messages impressed on both Elizabeth and Justine in their subsequent actions in the novel. Having suffered some of the same types of victimization at the hands of her stepmother, having read the effects of such abuses in her mother’s writings, and having perpetrated some of these actions with regard to Fanny, M. Shelley would have been alert to the issues that characters wrestling with this type of victimization would experience. In addition, M. Shelley was used to living under the pressure of familial expectations that she be published, original, and a model of propriety (Poovey 332). While it is always tempting to cast P. B. Shelley as Victor—and thus as one of M. Shelley’s major victimizers—M. Shelley herself denied any connection, and I agree that at the time Frankenstein was first written, she would not have consciously connected the two. However, that does not mean that the connection is not there. Christopher Small does an excellent job of tracing the likeness in his study, Ariel Like a Harpy, and Mellor discusses the similarities between the two as well (63, 73, 75). By the time the mature M. Shelley could see any resemblance between the men, she was actively reconstructing the public image of her spouse and would have felt it necessary to deny any resemblance again even though, like Victor, P. B. Shelley very often, in the words of David Ellis, “could persuade himself that he was acting from the highest principles, whatever he did” (12). Mellor points out that P. B. Shelley himself identified with Victor Frankenstein and could not see Victor as the villain of the novel (63)
Victor Frankenstein as Victimizer

Throughout the novel, Victor Frankenstein sees himself as the victim of the creature and occasionally as victim of his own overreaching ambitions, but can one claim he is more victimizer than victim? The whole story is put in motion because of Victor’s actions in first creating the creature and endowing him with life only to reject his creation and set it loose on the unsuspecting world, but that claim alone cannot make him a victimizer. In this reading, the creature is the direct victimizer in the story because he does the actual killing. Although Victor does not actually kill anyone in the novel, Victor’s actions throughout the novel show that he is an accomplished victimizer. However, in order to make this claim, one must define the term “victimizer” for, like the term “victim,” it can become nebulous. The succinct definition of victimizer is someone who takes advantage of others for his own gain. Victimizers can be both psychologically and physically dangerous to their victims or they can merely be psychologically dangerous. When using the word “dangerous,” one means that victimizers cause trauma, mentally and/or physically, to their chosen victims.

The question then becomes is Victor dangerous? In the novel, he does not appear to be physically dangerous. He does not often physically confront his creature, but that does not mean he is not capable of being violent. When attempting to diagnose those individuals who are dangerous as opposed to those who are not, Karry Kozol offers the following criteria:

one who has actually or attempted to inflict serious physical injury on another person; harbors anger, hostility, and resentment; enjoys witnessing
or inflicting suffering; lacks altruistic and compassionate concerns for others; sees himself as a victim rather than as an aggressor; resents or rejects authority; is primarily concerned with his own discomfort; is intolerant of frustration or delay of satisfaction; lacks control of his own impulses; has immature attitudes toward social responsibility; lacks insight into his own psychological structure; and distorts his perception of reality in accordance with his own wishes and needs. (Kozol 7)

Clearly all of these criteria do not fit Victor, but one does not have to be a perfect match to all the criteria to be dangerous to others, and as the text will show, Victor does meet many of the criteria. Kozol points out that the term “victimizer” covers a wide spectrum “with the extremely dangerous at one end and the absolutely nondangerous at the other” (7). Where in this spectrum would Victor fit? The answer lies in the number of criteria Victor meets and the degree to which he meets them.

The first criteria, “one who has actually or attempted to inflict serious physical injury on another person,” does not seem to fit Victor at first glance. As stated before, when he does come into contact with his creation, Victor does not resort to violence as his first course of action. However, there are several instances of Victor’s violent behavior in the novel. The first instance is Victor’s actions to procure the parts for his creation. Victor’s desecration of graves and the mutilation of corpses included violence. Even Victor is hard pressed to explain his actions to Walton. Victor dehumanizes the bodies he studies long before he becomes obsessed with his project saying: “a church-yard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life . . . food for the worm” (Shelley 30). Victor explains that his “attention was fixed upon every object the most
insupportable to the delicacy of human feelings” (30). Victor tells Walton, “I dabbled among unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay” proving that he has some concept, provided perhaps by the temporal distance, of the inhumanity inherent in his actions (32). Even with the distance, Victor attempts to justify his behavior saying he was driven by “a resistless, and almost frantic impulse . . . I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit” (32). The adjectives the older Victor chooses to describe his actions, such as torture, show that he understands the actions were not in line with acceptable, noble human behavior because enlightened individuals would not stoop to dismembering corpses in the graveyard. Yet at the same time Victor portrays the actions as the horrible assaults on both corpses and live animals—which they were—Victor still cannot regret the perpetration of the assaults because of the knowledge he gained from them. Victor reminds Walton several times that he, Walton, is “not recording the vision of a madman” and that learning to bestow life “was the summit” of Victor’s desires and “the most gratifying consummation of his toils” (31). These are not the words of a man who regrets his violent actions. Even when Victor tells Walton that his “human nature” turned “with loathing from” his actions, the reader and Walton are not fully convinced Victor is sincere (32). In fact, Victor, at the creature’s request undergoes the process again to create a female three years later. When the female is complete, awaiting only the spark of life, Victor, in a fit of “passion” tears the female creature into “pieces” (115). Victor exhibits not one, but three traits of a dangerous person—he inflicts violence on bodies and animals; he rationalizes, if not enjoys, witnessing and inflicting suffering on those same bodies and animals in the idea
that the suffering of others is all for the greater good of his discovery; and he is unable to control his own impulses when he is in a passion.

Victor also displays another characteristic of a dangerous person throughout the novel; he “is primarily concerned with his own discomfort” (Kozol 7). The most horrifying example of Victor’s concern with his own discomfort is Victor’s lack of action and his reaction to Justine’s trial. As noted above, none of the male Frankensteins come to Justine’s defense. Victor’s reasoning for not doing so is incredibly selfish. After first thinking to tell the authorities what he knows of the creature and offering evidence that the creature is in the area, Victor talks himself out of reporting what he knows. Victor tells Walton, “But I paused when I reflected on the story that I had to tell” and justifies his decision with the explanation: “I well knew that if any other had communicated such a relation to me, I should have looked upon it as the ravings of insanity. Besides the strange nature of the animal would elude all pursuit, even if I were so far credited as to persuade my relatives to commence it” (Shelley 49). Victor’s first concern is his own reputation. He believes the authorities will think him insane, and even if they believe him enough to commence a search, the creature will elude them. Thus, there will be no physical evidence to prove Victor’s story so he stays silent.

Victor’s unusual reactions to the grief of his family and the fate of Justine serve to underscore his self-centered universe. When Ernest weeps and looks for consolation from his older brother, Victor instead tells him “Do not…welcome me thus; try to be more calm, that I may not be absolutely miserable the moment I enter my father’s house after so long an absence” (50). There is no compassion in Victor for his younger brother, who was much closer in age to William than to Victor. Victor’s first concern is his own
welfare and welcome; he does not wish to be burdened with Ernest’s grief. Victor’s reaction to Justine’s trial reinforces the picture of a young man more concerned with himself and his own troubles than with those who are truly suffering. Victor describes his emotional state during the trial: “I suffered a living torture . . . My own agitation and anguish was extreme . . . I could not sustain the horror of my situation . . . The tortures of the accused did not equal mine” (emphasis added, 52, 54). Victor should feel horror and pain; after all, the murder and trial are the result of his own actions, but it is pure hubris to claim that Victor is more tortured than a young, innocent girl standing trial for a crime she did not commit. After all, Victor can always speak up and end the trial, but Justine is at the mercy of the court.

Victor becomes even more self-focused after Justine is condemned; he then begins seeing himself as the ultimate victim—a third criteria of a victimizer according to Kozol. When Elizabeth and Victor visit Justine right before she is to be hung, Elizabeth’s concern is focused on Justine; Victor is focused only on himself. When Justine speaks of despair, Victor tells Walton: “Despair! Who dared talk of that? The poor victim . . . felt not as I did, such deep and bitter agony” (emphasis added, 57). Victor believes that Justine has the easier time because she will be dead the next morning where he will have to live on with his knowledge that she was innocent. When Justine attempts to console Elizabeth and even Victor, his response is that Elizabeth would get over her grief “like a cloud that passes over the fair moon” because of her own innocence” (57). Victor on the other hand would have to live with “[a]nguish and despair” and that he “bore a hell within” which “nothing could extinguish” and “none” could ever “conceive of the misery” that Victor “then endured” (57, 58). Again, no one’s
grief can compare to Victor’s—at least in Victor’s opinion. Victor single-mindedly indulges in his own grief and despair: He says he “was seized by a remorse and the sense of guilt” which hurried him “to a hell of intense tortures, such as no language can describe” and that he lived in a “deep, dark, death-like solitude” because that was the only consolation he could find (59). When Victor’s father attempts to talk to him about his behavior, Victor listens, but he rejects his father’s advice because, although it was good advice, it “was totally inapplicable to my case” (59). Elizabeth also puts aside her own grief to help console Victor; ultimately, the entire family’s grieving process is interrupted so that Victor and his feelings are the main focus of the family. Victor’s self-absorption means he cannot conceive how others really feel.

Victor exhibits a further characteristic of a dangerous person; he “distorts his perception of reality in accordance with his own wishes and needs” (Kozol 7). The best example of this is Victor’s misunderstanding of the creature’s threat to be with him on his wedding night (Shelley 116). Despite all of the creature’s previous threats, Victor takes the threat out of context and believes that the creature will kill Victor on his wedding night and not Elizabeth. This misunderstanding would be more convincing if the creature had not made his intentions clear in their previous conversation on Montavert. The creature tells Victor that if he does not comply with the creature’s request for a mate: “I will glut the maw of death, until it be satiated, with the blood of your remaining friends” (emphasis added, 65). After telling the tale of how he became literate and what happened to him before coming to Montavert and meeting with more derision, the creature warns Victor: “Have a care: I will work at your destruction, nor finish until I desolate your heart” (emphasis added, 98). The creature never hides his intent from Victor; the
creature wants a companion, and warns that if it is not a female companion to share his
life in love and happiness, then it will be Victor sharing his loneliness and misery.
Before the famous wedding night threat, the creature reminds Victor of their previous
conversation saying: “Before I have reasoned with you . . . you believe yourself
miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you”
(116). The creature continues, further asking Victor if each man, Victor included, will
find a wife, each beast find a mate and yet the creature be alone? The creature asks: “Are
you to be happy while I grovel in the intensity of my wretchedness?” (116). The creature
reminds Victor that he will not be allowed such a future. The creature is committed to his
revenge. He will ensure Victor “shall curse the sun that gazes on your misery. . . . Man,
you shall repent of the injuries you inflict” (116). Only then does the creature tell Victor
“remember, I shall be with you on your wedding night” (116). Victor does not
understand the creature’s meaning, but most readers understand that Victor is not the one
in danger. Victor believes the creature will kill him; it never even occurs to Victor that
Elizabeth might be the creature’s target. One must remember that the creature has never
been complicated in his reasoning and his actions; he is always very exact in his threats.
The creature kills Henry Clerval to underscore his stated intentions to leave Victor alone
in the world, and yet Victor still does not understand that Elizabeth will be the one to die
if they marry. The only explanation is that Victor has distorted his reality to fit what he
believes should be the outcome. Victor believes he should die. In fact, he had been
contemplating suicide after Justine’s execution, but the thought of his father and
Elizabeth having to mourn one more person held him back (60). If the creature killed
Victor on his wedding night, Victor would be free of the guilt and also free of the
responsibility for any other crime the creature committed after Victor’s death. This is one reason why Victor is so convinced the creature will kill him rather than Elizabeth; the scenario where Victor is killed fits better into Victor’s desires. It also supports his self-centered worldview.

Another example of Victor’s willingness to ignore any reality that does not support his desired outcome is his attitude towards Justine’s trial. As noted above, Victor rationalizes that his testimony about the creature would not do any good. Victor also clings to his father’s hope that the judges will acquit Justine if she is innocent. Victor reasons it out for Walton: “I had no fear, therefore, that any circumstantial evidence could be brought forward strong enough to convict her; and in this assurance calmed myself, expecting the trial with eagerness” (51). Again, Victor’s greatest wish is to see Justine acquitted without his having to step forward. If this happened, Victor could continue to ignore his role in the farcical trial and the threatened execution of an innocent girl. This refusal to understand his culpability continues the pattern of Victor’s behavior from the moment of the creature’s creation. As Joyce Carol Oats points out, “Frankenstein’s behavior is preposterous, even idiotic, for he seems blind to the fact that is apparent to any reader—that he has loosed a fearful power into the world;” therefore, “he must take responsibility…. Except, of course, he does not” (546). Rather than taking responsibility and action, as shown above, Victor rearranges his reality to exculpate himself. His rationalizations for Justine’s trial, as well as his blindness to the impending death of Elizabeth, illustrate Victor’s tendency to adjust his reality to fit his desired outcome—just one more of the many dangerous traits Victor exhibits. Because so many of the required traits apply, Victor does fit Kozol’s criteria of a dangerous victimizer. However, one
cannot discuss Victor both as a dangerous person and as a person who perceives himself to be the victim, without looking at how Victor victimizes the creature in the novel.

One of the strongest forms of overt victimization in the novel is Victor’s treatment of his creature/offspring. Here we see a form of child victimization. Although the creature is never a child in the physical sense, he is very much a child psychologically. As the creator/father of the creature, Victor is responsible for the creature’s introduction to the world and his emotional and social growth. It is Victor’s job, as a creator/parent, to help his offspring find his way in the world. It is also Victor’s responsibility to teach his offspring his place in the society—how he fits into its social, political and economical structure. Once the offspring knows the family background, he can go forward and make a positive contribution to that society.

Victor himself has a well-developed sense of family, his rightful place in society, and his responsibility as the first-born Frankenstein male. This is very clear throughout the novel; Victor cannot even tell Walton his story without a full description of his family heritage and the importance of the Frankenstein name. Victor begins his story to Walton with the invitation to “listen to my history” (17). While the reader, and possibly Walton would expect Victor to begin the story with his own youth or even his birth, Victor actually begins his tale with descriptions of his ancestors and longer descriptions of his parents and their courtship. Victor places particular emphasis on his father’s character and the elder Frankenstein’s years of public service, saying: “[M]y father had filled several public situations with honour and reputation. He was respected by all who knew him for his integrity and indefatigable attention to public business. He passed his younger days perpetually occupied by the affairs of his country” (18). While this
elaborate family history can be partially explained as showing how far Frankenstein has fallen from his inherent familial traits, Victor is careful to explain that his father wished to bestow “on the state sons who might carry his virtues and his name down to posterity,” it also establishes the importance of familial ties at the very beginning of the tale (18). The ties upon which Victor places such importance are the ties he denies his creature. In addition to the family ties, Victor’s introduction of his narrative to Walton also reveals something about the Frankenstein family dynamics. As Thornburg notes, rather than unconditional familial love, the Frankensteins’ actions “towards others, in and out of the family, are characterized by effusive, self-sacrificial ‘service’ that calls attention to itself and demands gratitude” (97). Victor’s family expresses love as loyalty; in this too, Victor will fail his creature.

Throughout the novel, the creature is looking for a sense of history and place, some sort of tie to the larger world and society around him. When contemplating Volney’s *Ruins of Empires*, observing the De Lacey family, and learning the importance of lineage and property, the creature wonders: “And what was I [man, vagabond, or slave]? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. . . . I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?” (Shelley 81). The creature feels the loss of the ties to family that everyone around him relishes and the ties to station, which provide those around him with a sense of place. The more the creature learns of social orders and how society is structured, the more the creature bemoans his lack of ties:
But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my
infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; or if they
had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I
distinguished nothing. From my earliest remembrance I had been as I then
was in height and proportion. I had never yet seen a being resembling me,
or who claimed any intercourse with me. What was I? The question again
recurred to be answered only with groans. (81)

As the creature witnesses more of the De Laceys’ interactions as a family and broadens
his knowledge of the world with books, the questions recur:

I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike the beings
concerning whom I read … I was unformed in mind; I was dependent on
none, and related to none. … My person was hideous, and my stature
gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I
come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred,
but I was unable to solve them. (86)

Milton’s Paradise Lost with its sense of all things interconnected produces ever more
complicated questions in the creature’s mind of who he is, why he was created, and what
he was supposed to be doing: “Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to
any other being in existence” (87). Adam “had come forth from the hands of God a
perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator” even
after he has sinned and was cast out of Eden, whereas the creature was left “wretched,
helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition;
for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose
within me” (87). For each of these questions, Victor alone has the answer. But unlike Victor, whose family makes sure he knows his place and history, the creature is forced to agonize over the lack of answers desperate for some sign that he is loved, wanted, and connected to the human race.

Like Victor, M. Shelley was told of her family roots and the importance of her birth from the time she was a small child (Sunstein 21). In fact, her parents even chose to christen a comet seen before her birth as her “benign star” and were sure that the resulting child of their union was born to accomplish great things for mankind (Sunstein 18). The “star” announcing M. Shelley’s birth demanded that she become someone important. After all, stars do not announce the birth of common children; they are reserved for those who will change the course of humankind. Likewise, P. B. Shelley was taught the importance of his noble lineage and expected to follow in his father’s and grandfather’s footsteps (Sunstein 65-67). Shelley most likely would have considered the lack of knowledge provided to the creature an injustice and an abuse of parental duties on Victor Frankenstein’s part—another sign of his neglect of his creation/offspring.

When the creature, who exhibits the fragile psyche of an adolescent at this point in the novel, finds Victor’s diary, he is overcome with emotions he has no way to understand or endure. These feelings are the direct result of Victor’s “parental” neglect. The creature tells Victor how he feels during their meeting on Montavert. Showing Victor the journal, the creature says it contains the “reference to my accursed origin,” the “series of disgusting circumstances which produced . . . my odious and loathsome person” in “language which painted your own horrors and rendered mine ineffaceable” (Shelley 87-88). The creature continues saying: “I sickened as I read. ‘Hateful day when
I received life!’ I exclaimed in agony. ‘Cursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust?’” (88). At the time the creature and Victor meet on the glacier, the creature has had an ideal example of fatherhood in De Lacey, and two horrible examples of fatherhood in Safie’s father and Victor. The creature does not have the experience or training to allow him to temper his emotions and, arguably, nothing within his sphere of knowledge has shown him that there can be a middle ground. The creature’s inability to form a middle ground is evident in his preparation to meet the De Lacey family. He feels that he must perfect himself as much as possible for the meeting because “the importance attached to its success inspired me with a dread lest I should fail” (88). One must keep in mind that the De Laceys are the “familial ideal” (Thornburg 97). In this sentence, the wounded psyche of an abandoned, abused, and neglected child peeks through. If the creature is able to present himself perfectly, the De Laceys will overlook his monstrous appearance and see the “real” person inside the creature—the gentle soul longing for company and for someone to love him. However, like a child victim, he is not convinced that he will be able to win them over. The creature recalls his feelings: “Increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was. I cherished hope, it is true; but it vanished when I beheld my person reflected in water or my shadow in the moon-shine” (Shelley 88). Trying to make himself believe he is worthy of love, the creature daydreams of “amiable and lovely creatures sympathizing with my feelings and cheering my gloom; their angelic countenances breathed smiles of consolation,” but like most child victims, he cannot quite make himself believe in the daydream: “But it was all a dream. . . . I was alone. I remembered Adam’s supplication to his Creator; but where was mine? He had
abandoned me, and, in the bitterness of my heart, I cursed him” (88). Deprived of even
daydreams, the creature waits even longer and continues to observe the De Lacey family
before exposing himself and risking rejection. In M. Shelley’s creature, she is able to
construct an unusual viewpoint for the early nineteenth century—the consequences of a
victim of fate through the eyes of that victim, a victim who is also rebelling against those
consequences and his victimizer (Schoene-Harwood 143). The creature, as victim,
becomes human while Victor, as victimizer, loses his humanity.

Ultimately, the De Laceys do reject the creature, and the creature resolves to
confront his creator/parent. It is notable that the creature never has a name; a name is a
signal of one’s place in the world and also a signifier of one’s parents. Victor, as noted
above, never provides the creature with that sense of connection. In fact, one should
make note of the terms Victor uses to refer to the creature: “wretch…miserable monster
… demoniacal corpse,” “my enemy…dreaded spectre,”—all of which Victor calls the
creature before any of the murders take place. Scott J. Juengel explains that Victor
“projects wickedness onto the creature based on his disfigured ‘shape’ and deformed
‘aspect!’” despite the fact that Victor really does not know what the creature is like (362).
Victor continues his description of his creature with ever more demonic adjectives:
“more hideous than belongs to humanity … the filthy dæmon,” “depraved wretch…the
animal,” “fiend,” “Devil! … vile insect … Abhorred monster,”—all of which Victor says
to the creature when they meet face-to-face for the first time—“detested form … odious
companion,” “Scoffing devil,” “His soul is as hellish as his form, full of treachery and
fiend-like malice” (Shelley 35, 37, 48, 49, 60, 65, 67, 142, 145). These are hardly
appropriate terms for a parent to use for a child or even the terms of a creator for his hard
won creation. In fact, the only term Victor applies to his creation that might be considered benign, if not approving, is when Victor calls the creature “the being I had created” after describing how horrific and disturbing the being turned out to be (34). The terms Victor uses are designed to reinforce the low standing of the creature; they mentally reinforce the bonds of oppression every time they are uttered. The terms also underscore that the creature does not deserve Victor’s loyalty. These phrases in the mouth of a parent/creator are the ultimate rejection of the offspring/creation to which they refer. It should not surprise anyone that the creature, under the influence of this rejection, turns to violence as his only means of asserting himself. Mary Poovey explains that the creature’s “self-consciousness comes with brutal speed for recognition depends…on literal self perceptions” gained from the scream of the old man, the reflection in a pool of water, and the fear of the children (337). All of the rejection leads the creature to assert himself in another way. “Remember that I have power,” the creature exclaims after Victor destroys the female (Shelley 116). This exclamation is the creature’s attempt to reaffirm his value. Indeed, the creature uses the only power he has available, the power to ensure that his parent/creator is as lonely and as miserable as is the creature. In fact the creature becomes a victimizer as a direct result of his victimization at the hands of Victor. The creature acts out in the same way modern adolescent victimizers do.
The Creature as a Victimizer

One of the most intriguing parts of M. Shelley’s novel is the difference between the victimization perpetrated by Victor Frankenstein and that perpetrated by the creature. While the creature murders three characters directly—William, Henry Clerval, and Elizabeth—the creature still manages to keep the reader’s sympathy. As a victim-victimizer, the creature has a solid foundation for his murderous behavior. When the creature kills William, he is still an emotional and psychological adolescent. Part of the evidence for his adolescent state is his inability to process the emotions he feels after the De Lacey’s rejection. The creature flees into the woods that evening to express his feelings: “I gave vent to my anguish in fearful howlings. I was like a wild beast that had broken the toils, destroying the objects that obstructed me and ranging through the wood with a staglike swiftness. Oh! What a miserable night I passed!” (91-92). Enflamed with this emotional excess and not equipped with any other coping skills, the creature sets out to find his creator. The overwhelming emotions driving the creature do not abate; instead, they grow stronger. The creature explains: “The agony of my feelings allowed me no respite; no incident occurred from which my rage and misery could not extract its food” (95). If one considers the creature a psychological adolescent, his behavior upon finding William in the forest and being insulted make much more sense.

Much research has been done on adolescents who kill and the creature shares many of the traits of these juveniles. In the 1995 article “Adolescents at Risk for Violence” Richard Lowry et al discuss the many factors that contribute to adolescent violence. In the section titled “Individual Factors” the team lists four developmental
tasks that may “predispose adolescents to violence” (29). The tasks are the “separation from the family of origin through a period of narcissistic self-development,” the “development of a sexual identity,” the “development of a moral and personal value system through experimentation,” and the “preparation for future employment and responsibility” (28). The creature is working his way through all of these tasks. As noted above, the creature spends much of his time in hiding questioning his reason for existence. At one point the creature articulates his concern about his developmental process saying: “all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing. From my earliest remembrance I had been as I then was in height and proportion. I had never yet seen a being resembling me or who claimed any intercourse with me. What was I? The question again recurred, to be answered only with groans” (Shelley 81). He is discovering that his development is different from the humans that surround him and attempting to understand who he is supposed to be without any natural clues. This is a form of separation, albeit different from the usual adolescents’ development where they are trying to create an identity separate from their family. In both cases, the creature and the adolescent are attempting to define themselves as an individual; the creature has the added developmental pressure of identifying his “family” in order to decide how to separate.

Although generally a topic of discussion in queer theory, the creature’s attempt to form a sexual identity is an integral part of his narrative. The idea of sexuality, explicitly heterosexual sexuality, first appears when the creature is looking at the miniature of Caroline Frankenstein and the sleeping figure of Justine. The creature agonizes over Caroline’s portrait: “I remembered that I was for ever deprived of the delights that such
beautiful creatures could bestow” and that had Caroline seen the creature she would
“have changed that air of divine benignity to one expressive of disgust and affright” (97).
When Justine passes by, the creature reacts: “Here is one of those whose smiles are
bestowed on all but me” (97).xiv When faced with the knowledge of a sexual identity that
will never be allowed to develop, the creature tells Victor: “Can you wonder that such
thoughts transported me with rage? I only wonder that at that moment, instead of venting
my sensations in exclamations and agony, I did not rush among mankind, and perish in
the attempt to destroy them” (97). The creature’s next step in this developmental area is
to request that Victor make him a mate who is “of the same species” and who has “the
same defects” (97).

The creature is also attempting to discern his own moral code, another of the
developmental stressors that predispose adolescents to violence. This is evident when he
tells Victor that while living near the De Laceys he “looked upon crime as a distant evil,
benevolence and generosity were ever present before me, inciting within me a desire to
become an actor in the busy scene where so many admirable qualities were called forth
and displayed” (85). The creature is using the value system of the De Laceys to try and
figure out his own “moral compass.” Because they have not rejected him at this point,
the creature is still optimistic of his future.

Though less apparent, the creature is also preparing for his future “employment
and responsibility,” as Lowry defines it. However, the creature sees it as his place in the
world. Again this developmental stress is apparent in the soul searching he does while
hiding at the De Laceys’ cottage. It is his desire to find a place that encourages the
creature to “apply with fresh ardour to the acquiring of the art of language” (77). The
more developed desire for future productivity and responsibility is also evident in the creature’s argument for a mate. He presents Victor with a complete plan for himself and his future mate—they will live off of the land in “the vast wilds of South America” and make their “bed of dried leaves;” most importantly to both the creature and Victor, the couple will live as a model of peace and humanity (99). By the time the creature and Victor meet on the glacier, the creature has matured enough to argue his case; however, like the adolescents in Lowry’s research, the creature has already established violence as a coping skill and reaction strategy for stressful situations.

The creature also models another view of adolescent violence. In 1971, Dr. Carl P. Malmquist published an article in the American Journal of Psychiatry entitled “Premonitory Signs of Homicidal Aggression in Juveniles” which listed eight criteria that were present in male adolescents who committed homicide: behavioral change, a call for help, use of drugs, object losses, threats to manhood, somatization/hypochondriasis, and homosexual threats (44−49). Of the eight criteria, six apply to the creature—the use of drugs and homosexual threats do not apply. According to Malmquist, a behavioral change usually took place approximately forty-eight hours before the homicide and “usually related to shifts in mood or cognitive reflections” (44). These changes usually included a “deep pessimism about themselves or their predicament” and contained an element of “brooding where his already defective self-criticisms gained ascendancy” (44). The creature undergoes this behavior change after being rejected by the De Laceys. At first the creature tells Frankenstein that his feelings “were those of rage and revenge” because “despair had not yet taken possession of me” (Shelley 91). That changes after the creature finds the De Laceys have flown. The creature says that he spent the day “in
a state of utter and stupid despair,” which leads to the destruction of the cottage (93).

The creature dissociates from all emotion except hatred for Victor, whom he has decided to ask for “that justice which I vainly attempted to gain from any other being that wore the human form” (94). The creature attempts to find Victor in order to fulfill Malmquist’s second criterion—“a cry for help” (44). This criterion is the most applicable to the creature—it almost appears that Malmquist had the creature in mind when he expounded on the criteria. Malmquist explains that the “‘call for help’ was muted and often not perceived by those in daily contact” (44). The creature’s cry for help to the De Laceys falls in this category. The creature tells Mr. De Lacey “I have food; it is warmth and rest only that I need. I am an unfortunate and deserted creature, I look around and I have no relation or friend upon earth. These amiable people to whom I go have never seen me and know little of me. I am full of fears, for if I fail there, I am an outcast in the world forever” (Shelley 90). Of course De Lacey does not and cannot know that the creature is looking to him for that warmth and acceptance because De Lacey is unaware of the creature’s existence. The creature is much more forthright with his plea for Victor’s help. The creature first demands: “Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind” (65). The creature then makes a plea to Victor as his creator/father: “Oh Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection is most due. Remember that I am thy creature. I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angels, whom thou divest from joy for no misdeed” (66). Of course given Victor’s personality, an appeal to Victor’s emotions is doomed to fail. Malmquist’s description of the cries for help he witnessed seems particularly suited to the creature’s plea: “A course of events,
seen in retrospect, can be formulated in terms of the involvement of a victim in an entanglement of sadomasochistic relationships” (44).

Malmquist notes that the adolescent perpetrator is most often the person without power in the relationship. This is true of the creature at this point in the novel. He understands that he is more physically powerful than Victor, but he still hopes to gain Victor’s agreement to produce a mate—if not Victor’s approval—and, therefore, cannot and will not use his physical advantage. The creature, in his own mind, relinquishes any power he might have held when he tells Victor “I will not be tempted to set myself in opposition to thee. I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king” (Shelley 66). Victor does not believe the creature so Victor never loses his fear and distrust. Unfortunately, Victor meets Malmquist’s criteria for the adolescent perpetrator’s victim: “a friend or parent whose own personality needs and role had led [the friend or parent] to permit the patient to gain self-esteem through him. A threat, however subtle, that this other person might not be so obliging acted as a precipitant” (44). By allowing the creature to hope for a mate and to tie his futurity to that mate, and then by destroying the female, Victor has destroyed the creature’s hope for self-esteem—it is interesting that Victor knowingly does so saying “[t]he wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended for happiness “ (114).

Victor’s knowing destruction of the female is the “object loss” that sets the creature on his deliberately murderous path. Malmquist explains that “object losses that appeared related to a homicide involved lovers or mothers” (45). In the case of the creature, his potential lover—and the only potential for there to be a lover—is destroyed by Victor. The creature explains it best when he confronts Victor: “I have endured
incalculable fatigue, and cold, and hunger; do you dare destroy my hopes?” (115).

However, that is the final object loss in a life filled with losses. Prior to losing the possibility of the female, the creature has lost Victor and the De Lacey family. The creature’s relationship with the De Lacey family becomes even more important as it fits Malmquist’s description of a quasi-therapeutic relationship. Remember that it is the De Lacey family who teach the creature, albeit unknowingly, and who inspire him to learn to speak and to read. They are also responsible for the creature’s understanding of family relationships and family duty. The creature explains that he was inspired to goodness because “benevolence and generosity were ever present before me, inciting within me a desire to become an actor in the busy scene where so many admirable qualities were called forth and displayed” (Shelley 85). In fact, the De Lacey family provide a model of all that is kind and amiable. Through observing their interactions, the creature begins to make the family responsible for his future happiness and acceptance—almost akin to transference in therapy between a
patient and therapist. Malmquist explains that a “quasi-therapeutic relationship with a friend led to the friend being caught in a demand for help, yet incapable of giving it” (45). This is exactly what happens with the De Laceys.

The creature, as noted above, requests the De Laceys provide him with “warmth and rest”—only to be rejected by the family and destined to be “an outcast in the world forever” (Shelley 90). Malmquist notes that “[a]n abandonment or a situation experienced as a rejection from someone in an official role” often triggers a murderous rage” (46). Indeed it does so in the creature, who is surprised by his own restraint: “I could have torn him limb from limb, as the lion rends the antelope. But my heart sank within me as with bitter sickness, and I refrained” (Shelley 91). The creature is able to avoid violence at first because he has not given up hope that the De Laceys will eventually accept him. In fact, he is preparing to try anew when he discovers that the De Laceys have flown. Malmquist explains that it is in part because “the capacity to tolerate separation—let alone master it—proved insufferable to many of those adolescents” that they turn to murder (46). It is only when the possibility of acceptance is completely impossible that the creature exclaims “But again when I reflected that they had spurned and deserted me, anger returned, a rage of anger, and unable to injure anything human, I turned my fury towards inanimate objects” (emphasis added, Shelley 93). Without human targets, the creature is forced to destroy the cottage.

The rejection from the De Laceys follows on the heels of the other rejections the creature has experienced both in person and through Victor’s diary. After leaving Victor’s laboratory, the creature is rejected by the first human he encounters—an old man who “shrieked loudly, and quitting the hut, ran across the fields with a speed of which his
debilitated form hardly appeared capable” (70). The almost comical flight of the old man is actually inspired by a fear that incites him to super-human ability. The creature’s next encounter with a village produces an angry mob: “the children shrieked, and one of the women fainted. The whole village was roused; some fled, some attacked me until, grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons, I escaped” (71).

The mob makes such an impression on the creature that The De Lacey family members are the first humans that the creature is able to observe that react with anything other than terror and violence. The encounter with the villagers is brought up again twice by the creature. First when he finds the De Lacy cottage and the hovel attached to it, the creature explains, “after my late dearly bought experience, I dared not enter it” (71). The creature brings up the mob again after first observing the gentleness of the De Laceys: “I longed to join them, but dared not. I remembered too well the treatment I had suffered the night before from the barbarous villagers” (73). This encounter is the creature’s first exposure to how people react to stress and trauma—with violence. Felix De Lacey unwittingly underscores violence as the proper reaction when he, despite his “gentle manners,” attacks the creature upon sight—pushing him to the ground and hitting him “violently with a stick” (73, 91). The final lesson the De Laceys impart to the creature is one of violence as an acceptable outlet.

Between the physical beatings at the hands of the villagers and Felix De Lacey, the creature has experienced Victor’s rejection by proxy. Victor’s diary provides the indelible proof of his rejection without Victor having to face his creation in person. The creature experiences “every step” of Victor’s progress through the diary: “the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your
own horrors and rendered mine indelible. I sickened as I read. ‘Hateful day when I
received life!’ I exclaimed in agony. ‘Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so
hideous that even YOU turned from me in disgust?’” (orig. emphasis, 87). The terms of
Victor’s diary leave no hope for the creature, and Victor’s words provide “the reflections
of [the creature’s] hours of despondency and solitude” (87). Victor’s rejection is the
object loss of a father for the creature, but it is also a threat to his man-/personhood and
Malmquist’s fifth criteria for an adolescent to commit murder (46). After all in his diary,
Victor has written the details of his experiment for the creature to read and recall:
“Everything is related in them which bears reference to my accursed origin; the whole
detail of that series of disgusting circumstances which produced it is set in view” (87).
Victor’s rejection must also be seen against the creature’s understanding of how different
it was. The creature shows his understanding when he describes his feelings to Victor:

I was, besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I
was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they and
could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with
less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked
around I saw and heard of none like me. Was I, then, a monster, a blot
upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned?
(Shelley 80-81)

The creature is already doubting his existence as a “man” and calling himself a “monster”
and reading about Victor’s rejection underscored this separation. We should remember
that when the creature and Victor first meet, Victor verbally attacks the creature; Victor
later tells Walton that he “recovered [from the sight of the creature] only to overwhelm
him with words expressive of furious detestation and contempt” (65). Given his interaction with the diary and with Victor in person, it is no wonder that the creature never refers to himself as a man. He is always a “[m]iserable, unhappy wretch” or a “being” even in his own mind. The closest the creature comes to calling himself a man or a human is when he refers to himself as Victor’s “Adam” and when he reassures Victor that, before he was miserable his “soul glowed with love and humanity” (66). The creature’s last hope for attaining man-/personhood is the possibility of a female creature. In destroying the female creature, Victor has also destroyed the creature’s ability to become an adult male and to take on the responsibility for a family that would signal his attainment of manhood.

Malmquist’s sixth criterion, “[s]omatization, hypochondriasis or a recurrent medical problem” does not appear to apply to the creature at first glance. However, close reading shows that the creature often experiences somatic emotions. When the creature first attempts to go introduce himself to Mr. De Lacey, his anxiety causes his limbs to fail: “when I proceeded to execute my plan, my limbs failed me and I sank to the ground” (89). The creature explains how he “became fatigued with excess of bodily exertion and sank on the damp grass in the sick impotence of despair” after his rejection by the De Laceys (92). When the creature discusses his emotions, he uses the words “agony” and “anguish” more than any other; while this could be read as mental anguish, and that certainly was part of it, the creature also uses “agony” to describe the physical pain of his gunshot wound, which implies bodily anguish attached to the emotions as well (96, 95). As further evidence of the somatization of emotions, the creature appears to delineate between the bodily and the emotional expressions. In one sentence he first says “[t]he
agony of my feelings allowed me no respite” and then later in the sentence explains that the spring “confirmed in an especial manner the bitterness and horror of my feelings” (95). When confessing to Walton, the creature again differentiates, saying “I shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume me or be the prey of feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched” (155). Why bother to separate the two unless there is a somatic element to the agony? In addition to somatic issues, Malmquists notes that among his research studies “[n]o adolescent had florid delusion such as those seen in psychotic adults, although states of guilt, self-deprecation, and worthlessness abounded” (emphasis added, 47). As noted above, the creature tends to vacillate between these feelings throughout the majority of the novel. The creature best explains his feelings when he tells Walton about his crimes: “That [Victor Frankenstein] is also my victim!” and “In his murder my crimes are consummated; the miserable series of my being is wound to its close! Oh, Frankenstein! Generous and self-devoted being! What does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me? I, who irretrievably destroyed thee by destroying all thou lovedst;” he continues “[d]o you think that I was then dead to agony and remorse?;” and then, “[n]o guilt, no mischief, no malignity, no misery, can be found comparable to mine” (Shelley 153-54). Of course, one can argue that it is good to feel guilty after the murders, but this just continues the pattern seen above of the creature denigrating himself.

The creature’s emotional nature as a whole fulfills the last of Malmquist’s criteria for causing adolescents to become murderous: “An emotional crescendo appeared in the form of an increasing buildup of agitation and energy, accompanied by motor restlessness and disturbed sleeping and eating patterns” and “[a]cute anxiety, panic, or a presaging of catatonic excitement were in the clinical pictures. A breakdown of ego control over
affective discharge was evidenced in crying and sobbing spells and moody preoccupation” (47). After the De Laceys’ rejection, the creature experiences this crescendo. At two different points in his narrative he describes how his sleep is disturbed. The first is the night of his altercation with Felix; the creature tells Victor: “Oh! What a miserable night I passed! The cold stars shone in mockery, and the bare trees waved their branches above me; now and then the sweet voice of a bird burst forth amidst the universal stillness. All, save I, were at rest or in enjoyment” (92). When the creature does finally fall asleep, he is caught up in an endless loop of the repetition of the rejection in his nightmares and wakes “exhausted” (93). During the journey to Switzerland, the creature is forced to travel at night—further disrupting his natural sleep pattern. The final mention of the disruption of sleeping and eating patterns is the confrontation between Victor and the Creature after Victor has destroyed the female; the creature reminds Victor of his suffering, “I have endured incalculable fatigue, and cold, and hunger; do you dare destroy my hopes?” (115). This is the scene where the creature makes the full transition from victimized to victimizer.

The turning point for both Victor and the creature is the destruction of the female. Malmquist explains:

Halleck holds that an ultimate feeling of helplessness and hopelessness is the predisposing factor that culminates in an act of violence. I have been impressed by an additional specific component. A deep state of mourning may have brought the adolescent to a point of no return because of the seeming hopelessness of relief. It is as though an irretrievable blow or insult had been delivered to his integrity from which repair seemed
impossible. Mourning need not involve a literal loss but can reflect an affective state attendant upon a sense of disappointment. The disappointment may be an accumulation of academic or vocational failures, social disappointments, failures in love relationships, heterosexual or homosexual disillusionment, or a feeling that someone has betrayed one or has been dishonest. (48-49)

The destruction of the female represents, to the creature, the destruction of hope and the ultimate disappointment. Malmquist believes that in cases like this, the adolescent—or the creature—will commit murder because “[t]he homicide can serve the illusory function of saving one’s self and ego from a disintegration by displacing onto someone else the focus for aggressive discharge. It may be a last desperate effort to survive. A lesser evil is then ‘chosen’ in preference to the greater one of self dissolution”(49). The creature himself recognizes that he must act out in order to continue, and he tells Victor as much when the creature exclaims: “You can blast my other passions, but revenge remains—revenge, henceforth dearer than light or food! I may die, but first you, my tyrant and tormentor, shall curse the sun that gazes on your misery. Beware, for I am fearless and therefore powerful” (Shelley 116). The creature is now fearless of consequences and homicidal. Because of this fearlessness, the creature can force Victor to continue the chase through the arctic, leaving a note that reads: “Prepare! Your toils only begin; wrap yourself in furs and provide food, for we shall soon enter upon a journey where your sufferings will satisfy my everlasting hatred” (143). The creature’s sole focus now is continued life in order to exact revenge. It is interesting that Malmquist’s article ends with the question: “Could one go so far as to hypothesize
juvenile homicide as a miscarried triumph based on a continued desire to live rather than to die?” (49). In the case of the creature, the answer is yes.

Lowry’s studies on homicidal adolescents show how the emotional sensitivity of an adolescent combined with poor parenting or non-existent parenting—as in the case of the creature—combine to allow adolescents to commit murder. The researchers found that “[a]dolescent’s narcissistic preoccupation with themselves, their appearance, and their image, make them extremely sensitive to embarrassment or verbal attack” which combines with other attributes of adolescence to predispose them to “have a heightened chance of responding violently to embarrassing or stressful events” (29). The creature is certainly preoccupied with his appearance in the novel—he returns to the horror of seeing his reflected image several times during his first conversation with Victor on the glacier and addresses his appearance again in the final conversation with Walton: “Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of unfolding” (Shelley 154). However, in order to translate adolescent angst into violence, the familial relationships tend to be neglectful at best. In the section titled “Family Influences” Lowry’s team stresses that because patterns of aggression among children become stable over time,

it is important that parents and other caregivers of young children provide a nurturing environment and model appropriate nonviolent methods of resolving conflict and mediating disputes. Not surprisingly, family factors commonly found among adolescents who commit serious violent assaults include lack of parental supervision, indifference, rejection, and criminal behavior of parents. (29)
As noted above, the only behavior modeled to the creature is violence. Although, the De Laceys model appropriate conflict resolution among themselves, the creature is not included in their modeling. Therefore, the lesson the creature learns from Victor, the villagers, and the De Laceys is that conflict with him, the creature, is only solved by violence.

Lowry’s research team also found “that parents of antisocial children are deficient in one or more of the following skills: monitoring the whereabouts of the child, disciplining the child for antisocial behavior, negotiating and solving problems within the family. And modeling effective prosocial ‘survival skills’” (29). Clearly as a parent, Victor fits this description, as he only interacts with the creature when the creature forces the interaction by physically appearing in front of Victor. The research surrounding homicidal adolescents shows that Victor’s and, to a lesser extent, the De Lacy family’s treatment of the creature is the principal reason the creature turns murderous. The adolescent-and-parenting hypothesis is supported by a 2001 article which covers ten years of studying homicidal adolescents in Britain and found that in 54.3 percent of the cases where murder was committed “there was some evidence that the offenders had become socially isolated from either family or friends and in [32.6 percent of] reports had documented that the offender appeared to be depressed and/or hostile in the 6 months before the offence” (Dolan 317). In addition 58.8 percent of the adolescents in the study who committed murder were said to have experienced a “poor” quality of paternal parenting (Dolan 320). In a 1990 article in the Journal of Clinical Psychology titled “Adolescents who Kill,” a team of researchers headed by Kenneth G. Busch explains “[adolescents] who murder are not exotic individuals, but, rather persons with violent,
abusive, inconsistent, and aggressive environments” (484). In the article the researchers describe the homicidal individuals as “having organic inferiority and also as coming from an environment with insurmountable educational difficulties, and severe family aggressiveness” (484). This describes the creature and his environment to perfection and is one of the reasons modern readers remain fascinated and sympathetic to the creature. Victor’s actions as victimizer create a victim in the creature who chooses to turn victimizer himself only after he loses hope of any other future. As the creature himself says, “the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil” because he is “quite alone” (154).

Once the creature determines his murderous path, he gains power in his own mind. This is the first time he appears to realize that he has always had power in the mind of Victor Frankenstein. However, the murderous identity that the creature assumes is not a natural one for him. Unlike the murderous Victoria in Charlotte Dacre’s Zofloya, who seems to gain energy and power from her crimes, or his own creator Victor Frankenstein, who always rationalizes away any guilt that he should rightly feel, the creature is mired in the guilt of his deeds and takes full responsibility for his actions in the novel. This is evident when he addresses Walton, saying “Polluted by crimes and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death?” (155). The creature reaffirms his guilt and remorse as he addresses Victor’s corpse, proclaiming “the bitter sting of remorse will not cease to rankle in my wounds until death shall close them forever” before the creature leaves the ship to commit himself to the flames (156). The innate goodness of the creature is also evident in his actions towards Victor on their long journey through the arctic. Where Victor left the creature to make his way without assistance, the creature always gives Victor something to sustain him, whether it be food,
directions, or motivation—to “extricate [Victor] from seemingly insurmountable difficulties” (141). In fact, the creature only commits three crimes that do not involve Victor in the entire novel. He steals food twice before meeting Victor on the glacier—once from the old man who runs away and once from the De Laceys before the creature understands what he has done. In the arctic, the creature steals the food stores from one house in the village, his most overt crime in the novel because by this time the creature understands that he is stealing and because there is the potential that the family will not survive because their supplies were stolen. However, the survival of the family is quickly assured because Victor is able to purchase “a plentiful stock of provisions” from the same village before he continues on his way, leaving the impression that the village will be able to compensate for the lost provisions of one family (145). This unwillingness to harm anyone not attached to Victor, allows the creature to keep reader sympathy. Indeed, while the creature initially caused Victor’s agony by killing William, Elizabeth, and Henry, the creature also is the one being that provides Victor with a reason for living—as narrow and as unnatural a reason that revenge is, it is still a reason to continue living.

In *Frankenstein*, M. Shelley is able to create a textbook case of victimizer/victim interaction because of her own traumatic experiences, which anticipated the findings of social scientists and psychologists more than one hundred and fifty years later. Because of her own life experiences, M. Shelley creates a believable victimizer in Victor Frankenstein and, through Victor’s treatment of the creature, shows how victimizers can cause victims to become victimizers themselves. This, I believe, is the reason that modern readers are so fascinated with the creature that he has overshadowed his creator and has even stolen Frankenstein’s name for himself. The creature as a victim calls to
traumatized individuals on a psychic level and encourages them to see themselves in his monstrosity as M. Shelley was able to see herself in the creature. At the same time, the creature shows that vengeance against his creator/victimizer is not the answer to healing his pain.

The poisonous bond between victimizer and victim is the driving force for the last portion of the novel, and I believe this echoes the unconscious recognition of the poisonous bonds of M. Shelley’s own relationship to her father and possibly P. B. Shelley. M. Shelley’s unique layering of victims and victimizers and the realistic portrayal of victims who also victimize makes the text incredibly rich fodder for the study of victimology. In the end, everyone is the victim of someone else’s power or desire, even Walton; making it difficult to define many of the main characters as being solely “a victim” or solely “a victimizer.” The one thing that is clear in the novel is that no one, not even Victor Frankenstein, emerges victorious when caught up in the warped cycle of victim/victimizer.
Chapter Four

Fractured Brilliance: Charles and Mary Lamb and the Importance of Empathy

“A man to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own.” P.B. Shelley

Reconstructing the lives of Charles and Mary Lamb is more difficult than reconstructing that of any other individual in this study. The Lambs, unlike Coleridge, Godwin, and Mary Shelley, did not leave their letters and notebooks behind for biographers. The only extant letters are those that were saved by the Lambs’ friends and collected after their deaths. There are no extant letters between Charles and Mary to tell us what they talked about when they were separated; what we know about them and their relationships with each other and their friends is only what they revealed in letters to close friends and what we can glean from their writings: in this case mostly Charles Lamb’s writings as Elia because many of the Elian passages are lifted in whole or in part from letters he and Mary wrote. Because of this incomplete picture, scholars began trying to dissect the siblings’ relationship soon after Mary’s death. Like William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Charles and Mary Lamb were life-long companions. Unlike Wordsworth, Charles never married, and yet, with the exception of Alison Hickey’s interesting interpretation of their relationship as a pseudo-marriage, there have been no

In this chapter, the problem of names occurs again. To avoid confusion, I will be using the both Lambs’ first names.
strong suggestions of incest, or incestuous attraction, between Charles and Mary Lamb. In their case, however, many biographers use different types of readings to suggest an imbalance in the relationship and to portray the relationship as unusual.

On a warm September evening in 1796, Mary Lamb in a manic/psychotic episode killed their mother. Charles’ and Mary’s older brother James, always Mrs. Lamb’s favorite, was in favor of turning Mary, who was eleven years older than Charles and a few years younger than James, over to the government and having her placed in Bedlam. To keep Mary from that fate, Charles, then only twenty one, volunteered to take charge of Mary and to take responsibility for her and her actions, for the remainder of his life. Biographers have, therefore, generally followed Coleridge’s lead in deciding that Charles’ willingness to care for Mary was just short of martyrdom. Coleridge was one of Charles’ confidants during the difficult time following his mother’s death, and christened/saddled Charles with the appellation “gentle-hearted” in the poem “This Lime Tree Bower, My Prison” (28). Charles’ biographers generally use the same terminology and interpretation of Charles’ actions as Barry Cornwall (the pseudonym of Bryan Waller Proctor) did in saying: “What [Charles] endured, through the space of nearly forty years, from the incessant fear and frequent recurrence of his sister’s insanity, can now only be conjectured. In this constant and uncomplaining endurance, and in his steady adherence to a great principle of conduct, his life was heroic” (3). Even modern biographers and critics like Gerald Monsman and Thomas McFarland cast Charles Lamb in the role of sainted savior. Monsman compares Charles Lamb first to Cain and then to Orpheus: “As Lamb looked back upon or within himself at the hereditary horror, he enacted the role of Orpheus; Mary like Eurydice is revealed as lost to the nether world” (23, 88). McFarland
says that “[t]he unflagging humour, the relentless whimsy, the herculean outlay of charm, fortifications watchfully mannered throughout a lifetime, were designed to defend him, in the daily round of existence, from the stark realization of the smothering burden that Mary placed on his possibilities for happiness” (26). He further argues that the responsibility for Mary kept Charles “chained like Ixion to the ledgers of the East India Company” and paints a picture of Charles Lamb creeping “towards alcoholism and death” (McFarland 27). However, by reducing the Lambs’ relationship to caretaker and mad women, biographers are missing the larger, more important, element in the Lamb’s relationship: their inherent closeness and reliance upon one another.

Recently, feminist scholars like Adriana Craciun, in the interest of recovering Mary Lamb’s life story and her work, have been casting Charles Lamb as an overbearing jailor and a limiting force in Mary Lamb’s life. One example frequently used as evidence is the suppression of Mary Lamb’s name as co-author of both Tales From Shakespear and Mrs. Leicester’s School. However, their criticism reveals that these scholars have not read Charles Lamb’s letters closely because he rages at Godwin in a 1807 letter to Wordsworth, saying that Godwin “cheated me into putting a name to them” and then tells Wordsworth that Mary wrote the majority of both the tales and the preface (LCML V. II, 256). The scholars show that they are equally unfamiliar with Godwin’s personality, his intense fear of scandal, and his need for profits—after all, Godwin was not even using his own name when he wrote, and he had a figurehead for the publishing business to hide his involvement.

In the same way earlier scholars discounted Mary’s influence on Charles and her importance in his life, modern scholars discount Charles’ influence on Mary and his
importance in hers. Interestingly, both contemporary and modern scholars see the relationship as one of an imbalance of power and only see the tyranny of one sibling over another. However, a close, empathetic reading of the Lambs’ letters shows this is not the case. Charles’ and Mary Lamb’s relationship was a symbiotic one that benefited both. Lamb biographers and critics reach their erroneous conclusions by reading the Lambs’ relationship sympathetically and not empathetically. The difference between the two positions is subtle, as I pointed out in the introduction, but extremely important. Both sides, by attempting to read the relationship through sympathy, project their prejudices and attitudes onto the Lambs’ relationship and recast it in relation to power rather than in terms of a relationship of healing and of sustainment.

Charles’ and Mary Lamb’s empathy for each other, ultimately, allowed them to survive and thrive in an environment and through an experience that would have broken many others. In addition, the Lambs’ extended their empathy beyond their domestic circle to include their friends. Their strong empathy allowed them to become a stable lynchpin in their circle of friends. The Lambs connect Coleridge, Godwin, and Mary Shelley into an intimate social group, and they were available to each of these individuals plus the Wordsworths and many others when their lives spiraled out of control. Empathy allowed the Lambs, the two individuals considered the most “damaged” by their friends, to provide a support system to each other and to anyone with whom they came in contact. In addition, I believe the Lambs’ empathy helped make them extremely popular authors for children and helped Charles Lamb develop Elia’s keen eye. In order to understand their empathic development, one must, once again, turn to their early lives.
The Early Lives of Charles and Mary Lamb

Mary Lamb was born on 3 December 1764. At that time, she had one other living sibling—an older brother named John—who was only seventeen months older. At least two other siblings born between John and Mary did not survive. In the next eleven years the Lamb family would welcome three more children, Edward, Elizabeth, and Charles. Of the three, only Charles, born ten years and two months after Mary, survived. Based on the ages of the children, it would be easy to assume that Mary and John were the closest and that Charles, being so much younger, would have been left to his own entertainments. However, that was not the case. When Charles was born, John had already been sent to Christ’s Hospital and spent most of his time at the school. John and Mary were never close; one factor in this may have been Mrs. Elizabeth Lamb, their mother, who clearly favored John over Mary. When Mary was confined at Fisher House after murdering her mother, Charles wrote to Coleridge in October of 1796:

Poor Mary, my mother indeed never understood her right. She loved her, as she loved us all with a Mother’s love, but in opinion, in feeling, & sentiment, & disposition, bore so distant a resemblance to her daughter, that she never understood her right. Never could believe how much she loved her—but met her caresses her protestations of filial affection, too frequently with coldness & repulse, — Still she was a good mother, God forbid I should think of her but most respectfully, most affectionately. Yet she would always love my brother above Mary, who was not worthy of
one tenth of that affection, which Mary had a right to claim. (LCML V. I, 52)

Of course, Mrs. Lamb was a working mother, and as Samuel Salt’s housekeeper, she may have found it too difficult to keep up with her duties and her children. Michael Polowetzky believes that “Elizabeth Lamb’s many duties as housekeeper must have led her to appoint her daughter as surrogate mother for her youngest son,” but it is clear that Charles felt that his mother loved John more than her other two surviving children (3). It appears that Mary began exhibiting signs of mental instability quite early in life although there is not any documentation to explain what types of symptoms she exhibited. Polowetzky found that “[a]round 1774 or 1775, not long before the birth of her brother, [Mary] stayed [at Blakesware under her grandmother’s care] for almost a year” (5). In the letter mentioned above, Charles quotes a note from Mary explaining that when she dies and reaches heaven, her mother “will understand me better, my Grandmother too will understand me better, & will then say no more as she used to Do, ‘Polly, what are those poor crazy moyther’d brains of your thinkg. of always?’” (LCML V. I, 52). I believe this is the best evidence scholars have for Mary Lamb’s early instability.

However, Mary was not the only eccentric character in the Lamb household; Mr. John Lamb, her father, and his sister were both very eccentric. Their father was an aspiring poet who in his final years became obsessed with cards and quoting his own poems, one about a dancing sparrow and one about a widowed bullfinch (Watson 9-10, 2

Both Charles and Mary Lamb used very informal grammar and spelling in their letters and enthusiastically used written emphasis to make their points. Rather than mark every entry as original and disrupt the flow of the text, I will only mark some sections with *sic*. The more minor misspellings, grammar mistakes, and unusual word choices are left as written and unmarked as are all original emphasis.
54). Mr. Lamb’s sister Sara, known as Hetty, also lived with the family and the relationship between Mrs. Lamb and Hetty was mostly acrimonious. Mary Lamb wrote to her friend Sarah Stoddart about it when Stoddart was preparing to join her own newly-married brother in 1803:

My father had a sister lived with us, of course lived with my Mother her sister-in-law, they were in their different ways the best creatures in the world—but they set out wrong at first. They made each other miserable for full twenty years of their lives—my Mother was a perfect gentlewoman, my Aunty as unlike a gentlewoman as you can possibly imagine a good old woman to be, so that my dear Mother (who though you do not know it, is always in my poor head and heart) used to distress and weary her with incessant & unceasing attentions, and politeness to gain her affection. The Old woman could not return this in kind, and did not know what to make of it—thought it all deceit, and used to hate my Mother with a bitter hatred, which of course was soon returned with interest, a little frankness and looking into each others characters at first would have spared all this, and they would have lived as they died fond of each other, for the last few years of their life when we grew up & harmonized them a little they sincerely loved each other… (LCML V. II, 123-24)

In addition to Mary’s recollection of her aunt, Charles also remembers her in his letters and especially in his essay “My Relations.” The picture he paints in the essay is not a particularly pleasant one. In his Elia persona, Charles recalls that his aunt, although
“dear and good,” was “one whom single blessedness had soured to the world. She often used to say, that I was the only thing in it which she loved; and, when she thought I was quitting it, she grieved over me with mother's tears. A partiality quite so exclusive my reason cannot altogether approve” (Elia 121-22). Elia also recalls: “She was a woman of strong sense, and a shrewd mind—extraordinary at a repartee; one of the few occasions of her breaking silence—else she did not much value wit. The only secular employment I remember to have seen her engaged in, was, the splitting of French beans, and dropping them into a China basin of fair water” (Elia 122). Based on Charles Lamb’s recollections, Hetty appears to have been an added burden on the household rather than a helping hand.

Their older brother John also was an eccentric. The Lambs’ friends and early biographers did not think highly of him. Cornwall describes him:

I do not retain an agreeable impression of [John Lamb]. If not rude, he was sometimes, indeed generally, abrupt and unprepossessing in manner. He was assuredly deficient in that courtesy which usually springs from a mind at friendship with the world. Nevertheless, without much reasoning power (apparently) he had much cleverness of character. (34)

Cornwall also makes a strange statement about John’s status in the family, “John Lamb was the favourite of his mother, as the deformed child is frequently the dearest” (35). There is no evidence of John Lamb being physically deformed, and the context of Cornwall’s statement gives credence to the idea that is was his personality and, possibly, his mental processes that were “deformed.” Cornwall’s outrage may stem from his frustration with John’s unwillingness to help his family: “I never heard of John Lamb
having contributed anything, in money or otherwise, towards the support of his deranged sister, or to assist his young struggling brother” (37). Charles adds to the portrait of John as an awkward, eccentric individual in his letter to Coleridge after the murder when he writes: “I had the whole weight of the family thrown on me, for my brother, little disposed (I speak not without tenderness for him) at any time to take care of old age & infirmities had now, with his bad leg, an exemption from such duties, & I was now left alone” (LCML V. I, 48). Later in the letter, Charles says that he is concerned about John’s mental instability:

Let me not leave one unfavorable impression on your mind respecting my Brother. Since this has happened he has been very kind & brotherly; but I fear for his mind, —he has taken his ease in the world, & is not fit himself to struggle with difficulties, nor has much accustomed himself to throw himself into their way, — & I know his language is already, ‘Charles, you must take care of yourself, you must not abridge yourself of a single pleasure you have been used to’ &c &c. & in that style of talking. But you, a necessarian, can respect a difference of mind, & love what is amiable in a character not perfect. He has been very good, but I fear for his mind. Thank God, I can unconnect myself with him, & shall manage all my father’s monies in future myself, if I take charge of Daddy, which poor John has not even hinted a wish, at any future time even, to share with me—— (LCML, V.I, 50)

As Cornwall, who knew the all of the Lamb siblings, reminds readers, “[t]here was an hereditary taint of insanity in the family” (28). Charles Lamb, having the full family
history, was probably the best judge of his brother’s mental stability, and, therefore, one must respect his opinion. John, who is cast as Elia’s cousin J.E. in “My Relations,” is further characterized as impulsive and stubborn, and Elia tells readers:

the phlegm of my cousin's doctrine is invariably at war with his temperament, which is high sanguine. With always some fire-new project in his brain, J.E. is the systematic opponent of innovation, and crier down of every thing that has not stood the test of age and experiment. With a hundred fine notions chasing one another hourly in his fancy, he is startled at the least approach to the romantic in others; and, determined by his own sense in every thing, commends you to the guidance of common sense on all occasions. —With a touch of the eccentric in all which he does, or says, he is only anxious that you should not commit yourself by doing any thin absurd or singular. (123-24)

Again, this is not the picture of a stable personality, and, in fact, impetuosity is often a sign of mania in an individual suffering from Bipolar Disorder and several other personality disorders. Charles Lamb/Elia wraps up his description by saying “Nature never ran up in her haste a more restless piece of workmanship than when she moulded this impetuous cousin” (125). It is really a point in the favor of Charles’ and Mary’s empathy that they understood their brother’s character so well and still accepted him, despite his flaws and his refusal/ inability to accept the flaws he saw in his siblings.

With these eccentric, inflexible personalities as examples, it is remarkable that Charles and Mary Lamb became so empathetic. One reason for their ability to empathically understand and accept the diverse personalities in their families is explained
by a recent study. Charles C. Helwig, Philip David Zelazo, and Mary Wilson published
the results of an experiment that showed by the age of three, children can not only
understand the “concepts of psychological harm”, they also can focus “on moral features
of acts, such as intentions or consequences, to make judgments about the acceptability of
psychologically harmful acts and the culpability of agents” (76). In other words, children
can take into account the personality and preferences of individuals and then decide
whether an act would be psychologically harmful to that person. The study showed that
“most children were able to take into account the idiosyncratic or noncanonical reactions
of others in making moral judgments of psychological harm” (76). The children were
able to judge situations where children were given a puppy as “good” or “harmful” when
the child given the puppy was either afraid of dogs or afraid of spiders. They were also
able to make judgments on how much the person presenting the puppy knew about or
should have known about the child (79). This would mean that Mary and Charles Lamb
understood very early in life that their family members would and could be expected to
behave differently than others might based on their own idiosyncratic behaviors.
Therefore, Mary and Charles would understand that John would not react to an event in
the same way Charles would or Aunt Hetty would or Mrs. Lamb would.

However, this does not explain why Mary and Charles Lamb became so
empathetic while John Lamb stayed self-centered. Indeed, as Elia, Charles Lamb
explains: “With great love for you, J.E. hath but a limited sympathy with what you feel or
do. He lives in a world of his own, and makes slender guesses at what passes in your
mind. He never pierces the marrow of your habits” (127). Part of this behavior may be
personality-driven, but I believe that another reason was John Lamb’s privileged standing
in the household. As the eldest and the favorite, he probably never was forced to compromise. John was, as a youth, “fiery, glowing, tempestuous—and in age he discovereth no symptom of cooling” (Elia 126). Later when discussing John Lamb’s /J.E.’s extreme attachment to artwork, Elia pronounces J.E. a “Professor of Indifference” (126-27). Of course this is in part the indifference John Lamb/J.E. pretended for many aspects of life, but it also signifies John Lamb’s/J.E.’s indifference to anyone other than himself and his own opinions, as is illustrated by his reaction in the essay when his visitors do not react with the passion he expects to his new purchase: “Woe be to the luckless wight, who does not only not respond to his rapture, but who should drop an unseasonable intimation of preferring one of his anterior bargains to the present” (127).

Charles Lamb himself was an admirer of Hogarth and collected as many of his etchings as possible throughout his life and even wrote an essay “On the Genius and Character of Hogarth” in 1811, but unlike John Lamb, Charles had many interests, artistic and literary, so his depiction of John Lamb’s obsession with paintings is important because art is the only thing for which Charles Lamb/ Elia believes John Lamb/J.E. has true passion and feeling. Unfortunately, his feelings are tainted by his obsession and his superior attitude. This superiority comes through in the rest of the essay when J.E., despite knowing that Charles Lamb/ Elia has always been “a great walker,” tells Elia about “some pleasant green lanes” which he has found for Elia—and with which Elia is already intimately familiar as he has “haunted the identical spot any time these twenty years” (128).

Most importantly, John Lamb/J.E. “has not much respect for that class of feelings which goes by the name of sentimental. He applies the definition of real evil to bodily sufferings exclusively—and rejecteth all others as imaginary” (Elia 128). As someone
who has been raised in a family with hereditary mental instability and who has seen first
hand that instability in his brother and sister at the very least, John’s attitude is
suspiciously like outright denial. I believe that Charles Lamb recognized John’s mental
instability as what it was, a slight tendency towards mania that was rather harmless. In
my opinion, he confirms this by saying, as Elia, that J.E. is the “strangest of the Elias”
(orig. emphasis, 129). Remember that Charles Lamb is saying that John is the strangest
Lamb in a family in which both Charles and Mary had been institutionalized. In fact this
interpretation would help support the “deformity” Cornwall spotted in John Lamb (35).
It would also help explain why John, caught up in his own mental health issues and in
denial that any such thing existed, would never develop the empathy for which his sister
and brother were so fondly remembered. Perhaps Mrs. Lamb also perceived this
instability in her eldest and worked hard to protect John Lamb and thus to prevent his
instability from developing further.

One reason that Mary and Charles Lamb developed such a strong capacity for
empathy may have been their dependence upon one another beginning in childhood.
Charles Lamb tells Coleridge in a 1797 letter “I will some day, as I promised enlarge to
you upon my Sister’s excellencies; twill seem like an exaggeration, but I will do it”
(LCML V.I, 52). In an earlier letter he tells Coleridge that “[o]f all the people I ever saw
in the world my poor sister was most & throughly devo[d] of the least tincture of
selfishness” (LCML V.1, 50). In the essay “Mackery End, in Hertfordshire” Charles
casts Mary as Elia’s cousin Bridget and tells readers that “[i]n a season of distress, she is
the truest comforter” and that “[i]n the days of weakling infancy I was her tender charge—
as I have been her care in foolish manhood since” (132, 186). Clearly, Charles Lamb loves and respects his sister.

In addition to acting as Charles’ surrogate mother, it is possible that the two shared another bond—that of disappointment. Mary, from what we know of her adult life, was obviously very intelligent and creative—she taught herself Latin and French in her fifties so that she could earn income as a Latin and a French tutor (Hitchcock 223; Polowitzky 43). Yet because of her gender and social status, Mary Lamb had very limited exposure to school; she was able to attend grammar school in the afternoon for only a few years. Instead, Polowitzky explains: “Her parents decided she would be a needlewoman, and after she left grammar school she was apprenticed to a professional sewer of mantua-cloth, a fabric then in great demand. Good eyesight was of prime importance in this profession, and Mary was forbidden to read anything except the large-type family bible—and then for only a half an hour a day” (4). If it were not for Mary’s access to Samuel Salt’s library, the mental stagnation of her position probably would have been even more unbearable. Charles recalls Mary’s education in “Mackery End” saying, “[h]er education in youth was not much attended to; and she happily missed all that train of female garniture, which passeth by the name of accomplishments. She was tumbled early, by accident or design, into a spacious closet of good old English reading without much selection or prohibition, and browsed at well upon that fair and wholesome pasturage” (132). Polowitzky and other biographers are not sure how or why Mary Lamb was allowed to roam Samuel Salt’s library. Perhaps her mother believed that Mary was not actually reading the books. If Mrs. Lamb, like her mother, believed Mary’s brains were “moyther’d,” she may not have believed Mary had the intelligence to make
use of the grand library. Mary Lamb’s 1815 essay “On Needlework” shows that she has some resentment over her sparse education and her position in society. She believes that if women were allowed to participate in all fields:

“The parents of female children, who were known to be destined from their birth to maintain themselves through the whole course of their lives with like certainty as their sons are would feel it incumbent on themselves to strengthen the minds, and even the bodily constitutions, of their girls, so circumstanced, by an education which, without affronting the preconceived habits of society, might enable them to follow some occupation now considered above the capacity or too robust for the constitution of our sex (Works V. 1, 178).

Mary’s frustration with her inability to earn what we would today call a “living wage” as a mantua maker is evident when she argues: “What then must be the disadvantages under which a very young woman is placed who is required to learn a trade, from which she can never expect to reap any profit” without losing her place in society and her chance of becoming “a happy English wife” (179).

In order to understand the reason a mantua maker forfeits her chance of becoming a respectable wife, one must understand that the trade was on the very edge of respectability because the seamstress was in close contact with the bodies of her customers. Susan Tyler Hitchcock explains that stage comedies throughout the eighteenth century “capitalized on the stereotype of the lascivious dressmaker” and that a 1770 engraving from Robert Drury’s 1737 play The Rival Milliners showed two milliners “taking the liberty of touching [a well-dressed gentleman’s] body in ways that would not
be proper in any other setting” (63-64). Hitchcock also notes that popular women’s novels of the era also employed the same stereotype; this, she reminds us, is important because “[d]rama, art, and fiction pick out tendencies and exaggerate them, but they also affirm those stereotypes in the public mind” (64). Therefore, Mr. and Mrs. Lamb must have known that by apprenticing Mary to a mantua maker, they were ending any chance of a “respectable” marriage and family, and maybe they believed that, with her illness, Mary should not wed. At some point Mary must have overcome this disappointment because she writes to Stoddart in 1806: “I have known many single men I should have liked in my life (if it had suited them) for a husband: but very few husbands have I ever wished was mine which is rather against the state in general that one is never disposed to envy wives their good husbands” (LCML V. II, 229). Mary Lamb’s mental illness and the idea of passing the affliction to another generation may have helped her come to accept her lot in life, but it is probable that as a young woman, she was frustrated by choices made on her behalf.

Like his sister, Charles Lamb was apprenticed to a trade that would not have been his choice. As noted in chapter one, Charles Lamb attended Christ’s Hospital during the same years as Coleridge. Charles began school at the age of seven and was also a student of Bowyer; however, Charles’ experiences at the school were very different from those of the other students, as will be discussed later. Cornwall explains: “Lamb remained at Christ’s Hospital for seven years; but on half-holidays (two in every week) he used to go to his parents’ home, in the Temple, and when there would muse on the terrace of by the lonely fountain, or contemplated the dial, or pore over the books in Mr Salt’s library” (25). Charles Lamb was intelligent enough to be “the first student among the Deputy
Grecians,” but his stammer meant that he was unfit to be a clergyman or barrister so he left the school at age fifteen to become an apprentice office clerk in 1789 (Courtney 47-49; Polowetzky 7). There is some confusion amongst scholars as to how long Charles was apprenticed without salary. At his first apprenticeship, The South Sea Company, he was paid a £40 stipend per year in lieu of a regular salary, which forced him to live at home, but by the time of his mother’s murder in 1796, he was earning a £70 salary from the East India Company (Courtney 66; Hitchcock 24).

One of the defining events in Charles Lamb’s adult life happened that year amidst an upheaval that would change his family forever. His apprenticeship ended in February of 1792 and his new job at the East India Company did not begin until April. During this time, Charles visited his maternal grandmother, Mary Fields, in Hertfordshire and fell in love with a young woman named Ann Simmons, although the biographers differ on the time of the visit (Courtney 75; Ross 17). What is clear is that his grandmother, who died on 31 July 1792, disapproved of the match. Ernest Ross tells his readers:

It is said that his grandmother looked upon this affair with disfavor; and, as a matter of fact, there is no record of his having received any sympathy from any member of the family, with the exception of Mary. There were good reasons, however, why they should not have looked upon such a match with favor: Charles was only seventeen, he was as yet economically dependent, and he probably shared the family tendency toward insanity. (17)

Monsman believes that “Charles’ derangement and Mary’s manic-depressive psychosis were of hereditary origin, perhaps on the paternal side or, more likely, on the maternal
side,” which would have given his maternal grandmother’s pronouncement more authority (63). Even if his family had supported Charles’ love affair, they would have needed his financial help more than ever at this time. On 27 July 1792, four days before the death of Mrs. Fields, Samuel Salt died. Salt’s death was an emotional and financial crisis for the Lambs because not only had they spent nearly forty years in his employ, but Salt also provided the living quarters for the family. The Lambs were forced to leave their home and move to No. 7 Little Queen Street, Lincoln’s Inn Fields (Courtney 67). The emotional strain of Salt’s death may have led to Mr. Lamb’s stroke around the same time, which cost him the use of his left hand (Hitchcock 7). Although Salt left generous provisions for Mr. and Mrs. Lamb in his will, the loss of income and the need to provide their own living quarters left the family comparatively impoverished. Charles and Mary became the family’s primary wage earners and the caretakers of their elderly parents and their aunt. Despite the disapproval of his parents and their need of his salary and his presence, Charles still wrote to and met with Ann Simmons until at least 1794 (Courtney 75). Winifred Courtney suspects Ann’s family pressured her to end the relationship (75). However, given the Lambs’ concerns about the taint of hereditary insanity, there may be another explanation for the end of the relationship.

In December 1794, around the same time Charles and Ann ended their courtship, Mary Lamb fell ill. There is no concrete evidence that this was a manic/psychotic episode, but there are several indications that make it highly probable. Cornwall states that before the fatal attack of 1796, “Mary Lamb had previously been repeatedly attacked by the same dreadful disorder” (29). Ross calls Mary’s 1794 illness “alarming” and argues that although “[l]ittle is known about this illness, and it seems to be shrouded
in secrecy” there “is little doubt that it was brought on by fatigue and was of a mental nature” (18). Coleridge was concerned enough for Charles and Mary that he wrote about them in a letter to Robert Southey: “His Sister has lately been very unwell—confined to her Bed dangerously—She is all his Comfort—he her’s. They dote on each other. Her mind is elegantly stored—her Heart feeling—Her illness preyed a good deal on his Spirits—though he bore it with an apparent equanimity” (LC V. I, 147). The way Coleridge words his sentence may be an indication of Mary’s illness; he says that she is “confined to her Bed dangerously”—not that a dangerous illness has confined her. In 28 October 1796, Charles Lamb provides further clues that Mary’s illness was mental in nature when he notes in a letter to Coleridge that Mary was “conscious of a certain flightiness in her poor head oftentimes, & mindful of more than one sever illness of the Nature before” (LCML V. I, 49). These textual clues are reinforced by the text of the newspaper article written about Mary Lamb’s murderous attack on her mother. Near the end of the article in the Morning Chronicle, it states: “She had once before, in the earlier part of her life, been deranged, from the harassing fatigues of too much business” (reprinted in Watson, 42). xv

If the December 1794 illness was in fact a descent into delusional mania, Mary’s illness may have confirmed Mrs. Fields’ fears in Charles’ mind and forced him to break off his relationship with Ann Simmons, or conversely the Simmons family may have heard of Mary’s illness and caused the break. Either way, I believe that the close timing of the two events is too coincidental for them not to be related in some way. The loss of a future with Ann appears to have affected Charles Lamb’s emotional and mental stability. Courtney has found evidence in the writings of Robert Southey and W.C.
Hazlitt that Charles was having dinner with Ann Simmons, who became Mrs. Bartrum in 1799, two times a week in 1799 and was known to walk up and down in front of her husband’s pawnshop, where she worked, as late as 1803 (Courtney 76-77). Through 1795, Charles wrote sonnets; although, he orders Coleridge in November 1796, “do not entitle any of my things Love Sonnets, as I told you to call ‘em; ‘twill only make me look little in my own eyes; for it is a passion of which I retain nothing” (LCML V. 1, 60). At the time of the 1796 letter, Charles Lamb is viewing his passion for Ann Simmons through the traumatic murder of his mother and considers it a trifle in comparison. In 1795, the pain and passion of his love was still fresh, and as the year wore on, Charles Lamb became less and less mentally stable until, at the end of 1795, he was institutionalized in an asylum for six weeks.

The effects of that confinement must have been long lasting, as it is not until 27 May 1796 that he writes to Coleridge:

Coleridge, I know not what suffering scenes you have gone through at Bristol, —my life has been somewhat diversified of late. The 6 weeks that finished last year & began this your very humble servant spent very agreeable in a mad house at Hoxton—. I am got somewhat rational now, & don’t bite any one. But mad I was—& many a vagary my imagination played with me, enough to make a volume if all told ——. (LCML V. I, 3-4)

Of course, Charles is making light of his confinement, but in view of his sister’s future illness, it is important to note that he tells his friend that he was somewhat dangerous if one assumes he really did attempt to bite people. In his delusional state, which is
corroborated by Southey, Charles tells Coleridge, “my head ran on to you in my madness as much almost as on another Person, who I am inclined to think was the more immediate cause of my temporary frenzy—” (LCML V. I, 4). In his delusions, the two most important figures in Charles Lamb’s mind were his friend Coleridge and his lost love. Perhaps it is this connection that made John Lamb believe that Coleridge caused Charles’ descent into madness. It is not until December 1796 that Charles tells Coleridge he burned the poems Coleridge had sent and a “little journal of my foolish passion which I had long time kept” in his “highly agitated and perhaps distorted state of mind” (LCML V. I, 78). He continues:

I almost burned all your letters, —I did as bad, I lent ‘em to a friend to keep out of my brother’s sight, should he come and make inquisition into our papers, for, much as he dwelt upon you conversation while you were among us, and delighted to be with you, it has been his fashion ever since to depreciate and cry you down, —you were the cause of my madness— you and your damned foolish sensibility and melancholy—and he lamented with a true brotherly feeling that we ever met. (78)

As noted above, this is more evidence of John Lamb’s denial of the strain of mental instability that ran through the family. He prefers to blame Charles’ illness on Coleridge rather than accept the idea that Charles might have the same instability evident in Mary. Charles Lamb actually believes that it was the absence of Coleridge’s stabilizing company that allowed him to sink into madness. In a June 1796 letter, he tells Coleridge: “In your conversation you had blended so many pleasant fancies, that they cheated me of my grief. But in your absence, the tide of melancholy rushd in again, & did its worst
Mischief by overwhelming my Reason. I have recovered. But feel a stupor that makes me indifferent to the hopes & fears of this life” (LCML V. I, 19). It is only corresponding again with Coleridge that allows Charles to rouse “a little from my lethargy, & made me conscious of existence” (19). Reaching out to his long-time friend allows Charles to reconnect with the world outside his family and their increasingly deteriorating conditions.

June of 1796 was particularly difficult on Charles and Mary Lamb. The situation was so depressing that Charles Lamb feels some nostalgia for his mania. He writes:

at some future time I will amuse you with an account as full as my memory will permit of the strange turn my phrensy took. I look back upon it at times with a gloomy kind of Envy. For while it lasted I had many many hours of pure happiness. Dream not Coleridge, of having tasted all the grandeur & wildness of Fancy, till you have gone mad. All now seems to me vapid; comparatively so. Excuse this selfish digression.

(19)

In May, a month before Charles remembers his frenzy with nostalgic longing, John Lamb was severely injured. Charles tells Coleridge: “We have just learned that my poor brother has had a sad accident, a large stone blown down by yesterday’s high wind has bruised his leg in a most shocking manner—he is under the care of Cruikshanks” (LCML, V. I, 9). In June, in response to an invitation from Coleridge for Mary and Charles to come visit, Charles writes:

tho’ let me thank you again & again in my own & my sister’s name for your invitations. Nothing could give us more pleasure than to come, but
(were there no other reasons) while my Brother’s leg is so bad it is out of the question. Poor fellow, he is very feverish & light headed, but Cruikshanks has pronounced the symptoms favorable, & give us every hope that there will be no need of \textit{amputation}. God send \textit{not}. We are necessarily confined with him in the afternoon & evening till very late, so that I am \textit{stealing} a few minutes to write to you. (LCML V. I, 17)

The pressure of tending John in the evening is wearing on Charles, and it is evident that he is trying to keep a positive viewpoint as, after telling Coleridge “you are the only correspondent & I might add the only friend I have in the world. I go no where & have no acquaintance” and complaining that he is “alone,” Charles attempts to close the letter on a higher note by writing, “[c]omplaints apart, proceed we to our task. I am called away to tea, thence must wait upon my brother” (17). Given John Lamb’s less-than-charming personality, his addition to an already strained household could not have been timed more poorly.

Aside from Mr. Lamb’s loss of movement and of mental faculty from the stroke three years before, Mrs. Lamb had become an invalid as well. In late June 1796, Charles Lamb writes to Coleridge and tells him: “My mother is grown so entirely helpless (not having any use of her limbs) that Mary is necessarily confined from ever sleeping out, she being her bed fellow” (LCML V.I, 34). Mary Lamb was now responsible for her mother’s every need twenty-four hours a day and needed to care for her father and John while Charles was at the office. If Charles’ earlier characterization of their aunt is any indication, she was either not able or not willing to help Mary with these tasks and was thus another familial burden. In addition, Mary was still working as a seamstress to earn
money the family desperately needed. At some point that summer, Mary was given responsibility for a nine-year-old apprentice. Why the young girl was added into this already volatile situation is unclear. Hitchcock believes that Charles Lamb may have suggested the apprentice as a way of taking some of the burden from Mary (27). However, because Charles appears to have been the one individual in the household who was aware of Mary’s limitations, I find it hard to believe that he would recommend another responsibility.

The situation in the Lamb household was reaching the tipping point. Sometime before September, it appears that John Lamb recovered enough to return to work and to his own home. There is no mention of him being present on the evening of 22 September 1796 when Mary Lamb succumbed to her psychotic episode, but there is nothing to tell scholars when Mary was relieved of John’s care. Kathy Watson notes that in addition to the stress of work, apprentice, and family, Mary Lamb was operating in a very oppressive natural environment. Watson explains “September was as hot as June—78 degrees Fahrenheit,” which in London is veritably unheard of (44). The family lived on the top floor of their building so the heat would have been magnified in the Lamb household. In addition, Mary Lamb did not have someone like Coleridge to whom she could write to help decompress from the stress of her days; she was not even able to relax at night because of her responsibility for her mother. Watson reminds us: “Insomnia is now recognized as a warning signal in manic-depressive illness and it was impossible that Mary could sleep properly in these circumstances. With sleep deprivation, that peculiarly disorienting and distressing mental state, problems are magnified tenfold and rational
thought flies out the window” (44). Christian J. Lowery, a licensed clinical social worker, notes that Watson’s information is not totally correct. Lowery writes:

There is inconsistent research on what is known as the "kindling model", where precipitating stressful events cause episodes of bipolar disorder. However, bipolar disorder is somewhat misunderstood, in that the episodes last for days or weeks at a time and can be dormant for months. Psychotic features can happen (in the DSM as Bipolar I, Severe With Psychotic Features), but if the person rapidly cycles [between manic and depressive] states that is more indicative of a personality disorder such as Borderline or Histrionic Personality Disorder, or even Schizophreniform or another psychotic disorder. It all depends on the frequency of the episodes. (Lowery E-mail)

This means that Mary Lamb may have had some other disorder that was triggered when she was overwhelmed, but it does not discount that Mary Lamb’s living situation in September of 1796 was a factor in her sudden psychotic break with reality. Additionally, lack of sleep does appear to be the one consistent trigger in Mary Lamb’s psychotic episodes.

Both Watson and Hitchcock give imaginative descriptions of what might have happened on the evening of 22 September 1796, but the most reliable sources available are Charles Lamb’s letter to Coleridge about the event and the article printed in the Morning Chronicle on 26 September 2012. Five days after the murder, and the day after the article in the Morning Chronicle, Charles Lamb writes:

My dearest friend—
White or some of my friends of the public papers by this time may have informed you of the terrible calamities that have fallen on our family. I will give you only the outlines. My poor dear dearest sister in a fit of insanity has been the death of her own mother. I was at hand only time enough to snatch the knife out of her grasp. She is at present in a mad house, from whence I fear she must be moved to an hospital. God has preserved to me my senses, —I eat and drink and sleep, and have my judgment I believe very sound. My poor father was slightly wounded, and I am left to take care of him and my aunt. Mr. Norris of the Bluecoat school [Christ’s Hospital] has been very kind to us and we have no other friend, but thank God I am very calm and composed, and able to do the best that remains to do. (LCML V.1, 44)

Most scholars concentrate on the way Charles describes his mother’s death, but it is important to note that Charles Lamb is concerned about his own mental strength and his ability to cope with the terrible events. This is a theme that will repeat throughout his letters to Coleridge over the next several months. The *Morning Chronicle* article about Mrs. Lamb’s murder, as printed in their annual review, follows another notice of the “wilful murder” of a boy by the driver of the Newmarket mail coach driver, William Clark, on 19 September and is followed by the “melancholy account of the blowing up of the Amphion frigate” as reported on 24 September to the Admiralty (*sic*, reprinted in Watson 42). The article is attributed to 23 September and reads:

This afternoon the coroner’s jury sat on the body of a lady in the neighbourhood of Holborn, who died in consequence of a wound from her
daughter, the preceding day. While the family were preparing for dinner, the young lady, in a fit of insanity, seized a case knife lying on the table, and in a menacing manner pursued a little girl, her apprentice, round the room. On the eager calls of her helpless infirm mother, to forbear, she renounced her first object, and, with loud shrieks, approached her parent. The child, by her cries, quickly brought up the landlord of the house, but too late; the dreadful scene presented to him the mother lifeless on a chair, pierced to the heart; her daughter yet wildly standing over her with the fatal knife; and the venerable old man, her father, weeping by her side, himself bleeding at the forehead, from the effects of a blow he received from one of the forks she had been madly hurling about the room. For a few days prior to this, the family had discovered some symptoms of lunacy in her, which had so much increased on the Wednesday evening, that her brother, early the next morning, went in quest of Dr. Pitcairn; had that gentleman been providentially met with, the fatal catastrophe had, probably, been prevented. (42)

The article notes that the unnamed woman had previously been “deranged” as quoted above, and then tells readers that: “As her carriage towards her mother had been ever affectionate in the extreme, it is believed, that to her increased attentiveness to her, as her infirmities called for it, is to be ascribed the loss of her reason at this time. The jury without hesitation, brought in their verdict—Lunacy” (42). Note that the reporter allowed Mary Lamb’s name to be suppressed in this version, as did the article in The
Times. Only the Evening Post printed Mary Lamb’s name identifying her as “Miss Lamb, a mantua maker in Little Queen St, Lincoln’s-Inn-Fields” (quoted in Watson 47).

Craciun is frustrated that scholars and biographers take the accounts in the newspapers and Charles Lamb’s letters as fact, arguing: “I find it surprising and disturbing, that virtually all work on Mary Lamb repeats this same violent exclusion by relying on the accounts of Charles Lamb and the Morning Chronicle unquestioningly, to the point of echoing their language and certainly their (sympathetic) refusal to hold Mary responsible for her actions” (34). Craciun is arguing from a specific point of view, that women are capable of violence and that the feminist critics attempt to discount these violent tendencies as abnormal, and believes:

Mary Lamb’s violence tends to disappear in new critical work on her writing, or is neatly and quickly dismissed as an effect of ‘mental illness’ (as if this explains anything); such acts of exclusion are themselves acts of rhetorical violence, for they displace violence onto and external, perhaps unnatural, source, instead of acknowledging (feminist) criticism’s and women’s participation in violence. (24)

While I understand Craciun’s concern overall, I must point out that in Mary Lamb’s case, the violence cannot be separated from her mental illness, and indeed, it was only during psychotic/manic episodes that Mary Lamb ever exhibited signs of violence. Thomas Noon Talfourd wrote that Mary, quite literally, was not herself during these breaks:

She would fancy herself in the days of Queen Anne or George the First and describe the brocaded dames and courtly manners, as though she had been bred among them, in the best style of the old comedy. It was all
broken and disjointed, so that the hearer could remember little of her discourse; but the fragments were like the jewelled speeches of Congreve, only shaken from their setting. There was sometimes even a vein of crazy logic running through them, associating things essentially most dissimilar, but connecting them by a verbal association in strange order. (224)

In light of this evidence, one must accept that the Mary Lamb persona who stabbed her mother, in fact, may not have been Mary Lamb. In 1803, after spending several sleepless nights with the Lambs, Coleridge writes to his spouse:

> I had purposed not to speak of Mary Lamb—but I had better write it than tell it. The Thursday before last she met at Rickman’s a Mr Babb, an old Friend & Admirer of her Mother / the next day she *smiled* in an ominous way—on Sunday she told her Brother that she was getting bad, with great agony—on Tuesday morning she layed hold of me with violent agitation, & talked wildly about George Dyer / I told Charles, there was not a moment to lose / and I did not lose a moment—but went for a Hackney Coach, & took her to the private Madhouse at Hogsden [Hoxton] / She was quite clam, & said—it was the best to do so—but she wept bitterly two or three times, yet all in a calm way. Charles is cut to the Heart.

(LSTC V. II, 497-98)

Coleridge offers another first-hand account of the extreme alteration in Mary Lamb’s personality when she was experiencing a psychotic episode. From his letters, it is clear that Charles Lamb did not hold her accountable for her actions (or possibly her reaction) on the day of the murder. If anything, Charles appears to believe the entire family is
responsible for the murder. On 3 October 1796, he writes to Coleridge that Mary was “the unhappy & unconscious instrument of the Almighty’s judgments to our house,” and given Mary’s history with mental illness and possibly the family history of mental illness, he may be correct that his family bears the greater responsibility (LCML V. I, 47).

Unlike his parents, Charles Lamb chose not to marry, procreate, and pass the tendency for mental instability on to another generation. Charles, having witnessed Mary’s behavior for most of his life, was the best judge of that for which Mary Lamb should or should not be held responsible. Charles Lamb was the one who both mourned his mother’s death and dealt with the aftermath so one would assume his viewpoint was the most accurate.

Mary Lamb’s murder of Mrs. Lamb was a watershed event in the siblings’ lives. As traumatic as the event was for both Mary and Charles Lamb, ultimately the event marked a turn for the better in their relationship and their lives, although it would not be evident for several more years. Craciun is correct when she notes “Mary Lamb’s murder of her mother is in fact inseparable from her position as author” (27). However, Craciun is concerned with Mary Lamb’s apparent lack of remorse after the murders, arguing “[b]oth Mary and Charles (and subsequent scholars) absolved Mary of responsibility for the murder” (38). I believe this judgment is a result of Craciun’s own bias and the resulting sympathetic reading (38). There is actually a great deal of evidence of Mary’s remorse, but there is not evidence of a woman who was a penitent in the way Craciun appears to believe Mary Lamb should have behaved. I believe that this response is not, as Craciun believes, a result of the masculine inability to accept Mary Lamb’s violence as much as it is the result of Mary’s and Charles Lamb’s pragmatic outlook and their
willingness to accept the murder and its consequences and to proceed realistically from that point. Cornwall notes Charles’ outlook in his biography: “Apart from his humor and other excellences, Charles Lamb combined qualities such as are seldom united in one person; which indeed seem not easily reconcilable with each other: namely much prudence, with much generosity; great tenderness of heart, with a firm will” (8). Charles accepted his lot in life and moved forward; Cornwall explains: “there was at the bottom of his nature a buoyant self-sustaining strength: for although he encountered frequent seasons of mental distress, his heart recovered itself in the interval, and rose and sounded, like music played to a happy tune” (14). Even McFarland notes, “Lamb always accepted the yoke of circumstance, no matter how heavily it might have been, with humour and assent instead of with rebellion” (34). I would argue, supported by Cornwall’s and Talfourd’s accounts, that Mary Lamb reacted the same way.

I believe that, like the much-maligned character Pollyanna, Charles (and Mary’s) Lamb’s coping strategy was, and is, often misunderstood. In the book *Pollyanna*, by Eleanor H. Porter, Pollyanna plays the “just being glad’ game” (Location 389-92). The young girl’s father taught her to “just find something about everything to be glad about—no matter what 'twas” (Location 399). In the modern world, the concept of the game is misunderstood. Most people assume Pollyanna is refusing to see reality and is forcing a blithe happiness instead—a type of delusional state. However, the game is not a quest to ignore the awful situation; it is an exercise in realizing that there is something positive that can be derived from any situation. In the novel, Pollyanna requests a doll and instead receives crutches from the Ladies Aid Society that sponsors her and her missionary father. Pollyanna’s father teaches her that although she did not get the doll and was
disappointed, she could find some happiness or comfort in the fact that she did not need the crutches to move about (Location 399-405). Pollyanna recognizes that this is not an easy game to play; she tells Nancy: “the harder 'tis, the more fun 'tis to get 'em out; only—only sometimes it's almost too hard—like when your father goes to Heaven, and there isn't anybody but a Ladies' Aid left,” and then explains how the game eventually becomes automatic, “lots of times now I just think of them WITHOUT thinking, you know. I've got so used to playing it” (orig. emphasis, Location 406-417). Instead of wallowing in her disappointments, Pollyanna chooses to move forward by looking for some scrap of positivity. I believe Charles and Mary Lamb also used this same type of thinking as their coping strategy to move forward after the murder.

There is evidence of this type of thinking in Charles Lamb’s letters prior to September 1796. In May he writes to Coleridge: “Coleridge, there are 10000 objections against my paying you a visit at Bristol—it cannot be else—but in this world tis better not to think too much of pleasant possibles, that we may not be out of humour with present insipids” (LCML V. I, 9). In June, again in a letter to Coleridge, Charles writes a little parable that contains his frustration at not being able to break away from work to visit: “Hope is charming, lively, blue-eyed wench, & I am always glad of her company, but could dispense with the visitor she brings with her, her younger sister fear, a white liver’d-lilly-cheeked, bashful palpitation, awkward hussey that hangs like a green girl at her sister’s apronstrings & will go withersoever she goes.” (LCML V. I, 35). McFarland also notes this aspect of Charles Lamb’s personality: “Lamb may seem to lack depth when we view him through the hazy shimmer of his charm; when we look at the charm from the perspective of Lamb’s situation, however, we see it as arising from the abyss,”
and he adds, “the charm in his relationships as well as in his writing, constituted nothing less than a politics of survival” (26). I must emphasize that it was a very successful survival strategy because it did not ignore or attempt to displace the traumatic event; it acknowledged the event and the irrevocable changes that the event caused and moved on from there looking for some positive aspect in the situation. It clearly was not easy for Charles to find a spark of light in the morass after his mother’s murder, but he began by appreciating his newfound mental strength.

It is difficult to prove that Mary Lamb shared her brother’s outlook because none of her letters to Charles survive, but based upon the letter Charles quotes to Coleridge, Mary too has chosen to move positively forward. Charles Lamb tells Coleridge that Mary

is restored to her senses; to a dreadful sense & recollection of what has past, awful to her mind & impressive (as it must be to the end of life) but temper’d with religious resignation, & the reasonings of a sound judgment, which in this early stage knows how to distinguish between a deed committed in a transient fit of frenzy, & the terrible guilt of a

**Mother’s** murther. I have seen her. I found her this morning calm & serene, far very very far from an indecent forgetful serenity; she has a most affectionate & tender concern for what has happened. Indeed from the beginning, frightful & hopeless as her disorder seemed, I had confidence enough in her strength of mind, & religious principle, to look forward to a time when even she might recover tranquility. (LCML V. 1, 47)
Mary is concentrating on the possibility of a reunion with her mother in the afterlife. I disagree with Craciun’s assessment of the letter, that “Mary Lamb effectively surrendered the right to her own rage and violence by placing them in divine hands” (38). I do not believe that Mary Lamb ever fully surrendered her “right” or her responsibility for the rage and violence. Her brother stresses in his letter that Mary is aware of what has happened—the “dreadful sense & recollection”—and at the same time, that Mary recognizes and accepts that she acted out in her delusional/manic state with an impulsiveness and a violence that she was able to control under normal circumstances. There is also the possibility that Mary never felt this impulsiveness and violence unless in the midst of an episode, which the letters and memoirs appear to support.

Coleridge’s 1803 letter to Sara, quoted above, is another example of Mary Lamb taking responsibility for her actions. She informed her brother on Sunday that she was slipping into her psychosis. Charles, perhaps because he disliked being alone, perhaps because he hoped she would be able to last the week, did not take action until Tuesday—three days after Mary notified him and not until after she had lost enough control that she grabbed Coleridge violently. In addition, Mary Lamb, although she was crying, offered her brother verbal comfort by telling him that her removal is for the best. Ross also believed that Mary Lamb took responsibilities for her actions. He writes:

She experienced deep grief over the death of her mother, just as any normal person would; but she suffered no remorse, such as a passionate murderer would. To understand Mary’s reaction to the tragedy in which she had been the chief figure, it must be borne in mind that she was, ordinarily, possessed of an unusually sound judgment and an unshakeable
religious faith. To her, it was the part of intelligence to recognize the fact that she was somehow subject to insanity, and the part of courage to face that fact. (26)

This passage stresses that Mary Lamb’s murder of her mother was a manic/delusional murder and not a *passionate* murder. Ross also allows Mary Lamb the intelligence to understand that during a delusional/psychotic/manic episode, she behaved in ways that she would never have considered when she was in a baseline/normal state. Talfourd, who was one of the two executors of Charles’ will and who helped care for Mary Lamb after Charles death in 1834, also writes about how he witnessed Mary Lamb’s behavior when she was sliding into one of her delusional periods:

Miss Lamb experienced, and full well understood premonitory symptoms of the attack, in restlessness, low fever, and the inability to sleep; and, as gently as possible, prepared her brother for the duty he must soon perform; and thus, unless she could stave off the terrible separation till Sunday, obliged him to ask leave of absence from the office as if for a day’s pleasure—a bitter mockery! On one occasion Mr. Charles Lloyd met them, slowly pacing together a little footpath in Hoxton fields, both weeping bitterly, and found on joining them, that they were taking their solemn way to the accustomed Asylum! (241)

The first-hand accounts present the picture of a woman who was fully aware of both her delusional tendencies and her latent violence and who was aware of how fatally that violence was once and could again be expressed. The other aspect these accounts
highlight is the extraordinary relationship between the siblings—a relationship that may have been the ultimate survival and recovery tool for both Mary and Charles Lamb.

**The Importance of Charles’ and Mary Lamb’s Relationship**

Charles Lamb, one must remember, was still very aware of his own mental health issues when he agreed to take legal responsibility for Mary’s actions, preventing her from being made a ward of the government and then sentenced to Bethlem Hospital, known colloquially as Bedlam. Charles also shows that he was fully aware of the impact that decision would have on his life. In his 3 October 1796 letter to Coleridge, he writes, “I know John will make speeches about it, but she shall not go into a hospital” (LCML V. 1 49). Charles Lamb knew that one of Mary’s greatest fears was that she would end up in Bethlem; he writes that the women who had charge of Mary’s care at Fisher House told him Mary “was but the other morning saying, she knew she must go to Bethlem for life; that one of her brother’s would have it so, but the other would wish it Not, but he obliged to go with the stream; that she had often as she passed Bedlam thought it likely ‘here it may be my fate to end my days’” (49). Charles Lamb then outlines his financial plan to ensure that Mary, his father, and he himself have adequate resources—he even includes a maid to care for his father during the day. This is evidence of the thought he put into his plan for the future. He ends the discussion of Mary’s care by saying that if he cannot work within his budget that he (and his father) “ought to burn by slow fires, & I almost would, that Mary might not go into an hospital”(49-50). Cornwall tells readers that Mrs.
Lamb’s murder and the responsibility for Mary “instead of casting him down, and paralyzing his powers, braced and strung his sinews into preternatural firmness” (32). It is clear from Mary’s statement to her nurses that she expects John Lamb, as the eldest, to have the final say in her placement. Instead, Charles Lamb defies John and steps forward with an alternative, well-thought-out plan, and, as Ross acknowledges, “[w]ith that act, and from that moment, he became the head of the house” (24). More importantly, he became the instrument that continued a relationship with his sister, a relationship that had the potential to help both of them heal and the potential to destroy them both.

As noted earlier, Mary Lamb was a surrogate mother for Charles as a child, but gratitude alone is not enough reason for him to offer to tie himself to his sister and her needs. I believe that Charles Lamb, as someone who had succumbed to madness himself, inherently understood that Mary would benefit from the relationship and that he would benefit as well. This is evident in the way he refuses Coleridge’s (probably impetuous) invitation for Mary to come live with him and Sara:

> your invitation went to my very heart—but you have a power of exciting interest, [o]f leading all hearts captive, too forcible to admit of Mary’s being with you—. I consider her as perpetually on the brink of madness—. I think you would almost make her dance within an inch of the precipice—she must be with duller fancies, & cooler intellects…. I know a young man of this description, who has suited her these last twenty years, & may live to do so still—if we are one day restor’d to each other.

(LCML V. I, 127)
At the time of the murder, Charles Lamb was twenty-one years old and Mary was thirty-two years old. Mr. Lamb was already in his mid-seventies and died at the age of seventy-eight, and Mrs. Lamb was sixty-eight when she was killed so Charles must have understood that this was an extremely long-term commitment. This is why so many biographers believe that the relationship was a drain/strain for either one or the other of the siblings—remember McFarland calls it a “smothering burden” (26).

The Lamb siblings provide scholars many insights into their relationship in the text of their letters to friends, and this evidence shows that the relationship was a mutually beneficial one. This is not to say that there were never any disagreements or frustrations—in 1805 Charles Lamb tells Dorothy Wordsworth that the two are “Gum Boil and Tooth Ache: for they use to say that a Gum Boil is a great relief to a Tooth Ache,” meaning that one pain cancels out the other (LCML V. II, 176). In fact, the frustrations appear to make the relationship more real and “normal” than that of keeper and madwoman. Charles gives his first insight into how the relationship works and one of his frustrations in December 1796 when he tells Coleridge:

My sister indeed, is all I can wish in a companion; but our spirits are alike poorly, our reading and knowledge from the self-same sources, our communication with the scenes of the world alike narrow: never having kept separate company, or any ‘company’ ‘together’—never having read separate books, and few books together—what knowledge have we to convey to each other? (LCML V. I, 79)
This passage shows that the two Lamb siblings could be too much alike and that Charles needed the company of his friends to make up the difference—as did Mary Lamb once she gained a circle of friends.

One part of Charles Lamb’s personality that many modern scholars tend to overlook is his intense dislike of being by himself. When Mary was confined in 1800, Charles Lamb wrote to his friend Thomas Manning:

I am quite out of spirits, and feel as if I should never recover them. But why should not this pass away? — I am foolish, but judge of me by my situation— —. Our servant is dead, and my sister is ill— — so ill as to make a removal to a place of confinement absolutely necessary— —. I have been left *alone* in a house, where but 10 days since living Beings were, &—Noises of life where heard. I have made the experiment & find I cannot bear it any longer—. Last night I went to sleep at White’s, with whom I am to be till I can find a settlement—. I have given up my house, and must look out for lodgings— (LCML V. I, 204)

This letter is an important insight into Charles Lamb’s mind because Manning, of all of Charles’ correspondents, was the least likely to get a serious, emotional letter from him. Most of the letters Charles wrote to Manning are light and gossipy, and Charles generally refers to Mary as his “old housekeeper” and treats her illnesses lightly (LCML V. II, 172). However in this letter, possibly because he was cut off from his usual confidant, Coleridge, Charles gives Manning some insight into how necessary Mary’s presence was in order for him to feel secure and stable: “I expect Mary will get better, before many weeks are gone—but at present I feel my daily & hourly prop has fallen from me. . I
totter and stagger with weakness, for nobody can supply her place to me—. White has *all kindness*, but not *sympathy*” (sic, LCML V. I, 204). The last sentence of this letter is one of the most important insights into how Charles’ and Mary’s relationship worked. Charles makes the distinction between kindness and sympathy, which I believe he uses in the sense empathy would be used today. James White is kind enough to Charles, but there is a taint of pity. White cannot empathetically understand why Charles feels the way he does. Mary, it is implied, does empathetically understand her brother and does not judge a grown man for not wanting to be alone in a house where a death occurred.

In 1805, Charles writes to Godwin that he has been in the country for several days “being left alone by the illness of poor Mary” (orig. emphasis, LCML V. II 168). The next extant letter in 1805 is from Charles Lamb to Dorothy Wordsworth, who seems to be a stand in for Mary Lamb’s understanding ear, and Charles writes again about his need for Mary’s company:

> I get so irritable & wretched with *fear* that I constantly hasten on the disorder. You can conceive the misery of such a foresight. I am sure that for the week before she left me, I was little better than light-headed. I now am calm, but sadly taken down, & flat. I have every reason to suppose that this illness, like all her former ones, will be but temporary. But I cannot always feel [s]o. Meantime she is *dead* to me and I miss a [prop]. All my strength is gone, and I am like a [fool, bere]ft of her co-operation. I dare not think, lest I [should think] wrong; so used am I to look up to her [in the least] & the biggest perplexity. To say all that [I know of her] would be more than I think any body could [believe or even under]stand;
and when I hope to have her well [again with me] it would be sinning against her feelings to go about to praise her: for I can conceal nothing that I do from her. She is older, & wiser, & better than me, and all my wretched imperfections I cover to myself by resolutely thinking on her goodness. She would share life & death, heaven & hell with me. She lives for me. And I know I have been wasting & teasing her life for five years past incessantly with my cursed drinking & ways of going on. But even in this up-braiding of myself I am offending against her; for I know that she has cleaved to me for better, for worse; and if the balance has been against her hitherto, it was a noble trade.

I am stupid & lose myself in what I write. I write rather what answers to my feelings (which are sometimes sharp enough) than express my present ones, for I am only flat & stupid. (LCML V. II 169-170)

Charles Lamb is feeling some guilt in this letter, and his emotions are unsettled as is clear by the number of letters and words that were left out in the original and filled in by Marrs when he edited. It is obvious, however, that the siblings have a more symbiotic relationship than most scholars would like to admit. Charles is as dependent upon Mary as she is upon him and losing her to her psychosis is devastating. He feels rootless and adrift.

Indeed Mary Lamb laughingly writes to Stoddart in 1806 that Charles’ attempt to have a separate set of lodgings where he could be alone to write has been a miserable failure:
The Lodging—that pride and pleasure of your heart & mine, is given up—

*and here he is again*—Charles I mean; as unsettled and undetermined as ever. When he went to the poor lodging after the holidays I told you he had taken, he could not endure the solitariness of them, and I had no rest for the sole of my foot, till I promised to believe his solemn protestations that he could & would write as well at home as there—. Do you believe this? — — — — I have no power over Charles—he will do—what he will do. (LCML V. II, 220)

Charles needs Mary in his life to keep him stable and productive just as much as Mary needs Charles to live outside of an institution. This is not a relationship where Charles feels that he has given up his own life to Mary’s needs. It is not a relationship in which Mary feels that Charles is an oppressor who, as Susan Sage Heinzelman claims, permits “her to speak only under and through” his guardianship (97). There is also no evidence in the letters that Charles’ “tireless love and tender care were a great source of consolation to her, but they also filled Mary with a terrible sense of guilt,” as Polowetzky believes (13). In fact, in 1804 Mary Lamb claims the power to monitor Charles should she choose to use it when she tells Stoddart:

> By entreaties & prayers I might have prevailed on my brother to say nothing about it. But I make a point of conscience never to interfere, or cross my brother in the humor he happens to be in. It always seems to me to be a vexatious kind of Tyranny that women have no business to exercise over men, which merely because *they having a better judgment* they have the power to do. Let *men* alone, and at last we find they come
round to the right way, which we by a kind of intuition perceive at once.

But better, far better, that we should let them often do wrong, than that they should have the torment of [a] Monitor always at their elbows.

(LCML V. II, 142-43)

In this letter to her friend, Mary’s voice as an individual, one who is secure in her ability to make decisions and judgment calls is clear and strong; she does not fear her brother’s reaction to her writing—in fact, Charles added a post script to this letter that showed he had read it. It is again important to note that Mary prefers to let Charles find his own way, even if it means he will make mistakes, rather than attempt to control his words or actions.

The only evidence in Mary Lamb’s letters of her fearing Charles’ response to something occurs in her letter to Stoddart in November of 1805. At the end of a letter apologizing for interfering in her friend’s situation with unsolicited advice and promising, “I think is the last time I will ever let my pen run away with me,” Mary writes “if Charles who must see your letter was to know I had first written foolishly & then fretted about the event of my folly, he would both ways be angry with me” (LCML V.II, 186). However, one must note several different points in the letter. First, Mary writes that Charles would be angry with her both for writing foolishly and for fretting about it. Given Mary Lamb’s tendency towards impulsivity when slipping into mania/psychosis, Charles might be upset that she wrote “foolishly” and excited herself in the process. Talfourd writes that Mary “[t]hough her conversation in sanity was never marked by smartness or repartee, seldom rising beyond that of a sensible quiet gentlewoman appreciating and enjoying the talents of her friends, it was otherwise in her madness” (224). Cornwall also notes this
tendency in his memoirs, although they are clearly biased by his own sympathy for Charles Lamb:

Her relapses were not dependent on the seasons; they came in hot summers and with the freezing winters. The only remedy seems to have been extreme quiet, when any slight symptom of uneasiness was apparent. Charles (poor fellow) had to live, day and night, in the society of a person who was—mad! If any exciting talk occurred he had to dismiss his friend, with a whisper. If any stupor or extraordinary silence was observed, then he had to rouse her instantly. He has been seen to take the kettle from the fire and place it for a moment on her head-dress, in order to startle her into recollection. He lived in a state of constant anxiety; —and there was no help. (113)

If one ignores Cornwall’s sympathetic and possibly incorrect belief that Charles must have lived in constant anxiety, the passage illustrates that impulsivity, which Mary also admits to in the letter—being “under a forcible impulse which I could not at that time resist,” and stupor, which could be the result of “fretting,” were often signs that Mary Lamb was slipping into one of her psychotic episodes (LCML V. II, 186).

In fact, Charles may have been particularly concerned about Mary’s state of mind at this time with good reason. 1805 is the year in which Mary Lamb was confined for the longest continuous stretch yet, ten weeks. In addition, prior to her comment about Charles’ anger, Mary wrote that she was having a difficult time returning to a baseline, or “normal,” emotional state:
Your kind heart will I know even if you have been a little displeased forgive me when I assure you my spirits have been so much hurt by my last illness that at times I hardly know what I do—I do not mean to alarm you about myself, or to plead in excuse that I am very much otherwise than you have always known me—I do not think any one perceives me altered, but I have lost all self confidence in my own actions, & one cause of my low spirits is that I never feel satisfied with any thing I do—a perception of not being in a sane state perpetually haunts me. I am ashamed to confess this weakness to you, which as I am so sensible of I ought to strive to conquer. (LCML V. II, 186)

This passage should also alert scholars that Mary Lamb is not able to fully perceive or predict other people’s reactions at this time, and she is aware of that fact. She specifically states that she has “lost all self confidence” and that she is experiencing “a perception of not being in a sane state” (186). Mary Lamb is not yet fully recovered from her last psychotic episode and so it would be inappropriate to use the text of this letter to infer that Charles was domineering.

The Lambs’ Healing Empathy

In their close relationship of equals, Charles and Mary Lamb were enacting what Judith Herman terms a healing relationship (133). Herman explains the “core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others.
Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of
ew connections” (133). Herman stresses that these relationships are vital because
recovery “can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in
isolation” (133). Charles Lamb appears to have discovered this when he reached out to
Coleridge after his own psychotic break. He learned, possibly by accident, what Herman
calls the “first principle of recovery” in which the individual “must be the author and
arbiter of her own recovery” (133). Even in the modern world, Herman explains, the
relationship between individual and therapist “is by no means the only or even the best
relationship in which recovery is fostered” (134). One of the reasons Charles Lamb’s
relationship with Coleridge was healing was that it provided Charles the ability to safely
express himself and his experiences, which he told Coleridge in June of 1796: “A
correspondence, opening with you has roused my a little from my lethargy, & made me
conscious of existence. Indulge me in it. I will not be very troublesome” (LCML V. I,
78). When Charles offered to become legally responsible for his sister, he offered Mary
the same safety and the chance to empower her own recovery from the trauma she
experienced. Charles, by not pronouncing judgment on his sister, allowed her to take the
first steps towards her own empowerment. By providing for her separate living quarters,
Charles gave Mary the chance to come to terms with her actions without the constant
pressure and reminders that living with her senile father would have produced. Charles
explained as much to Coleridge when he wrote in December of 1796:

She is quite well, —but must not, I fear, come live with up yet a good
while. In the first place, because at present it would hurt her, & hurt my
father, for them to be together: secondly from a regard to the world’s good
report, for I fear, I fear, tongues will be busy *whenever* that event takes place. Some have hinted, *one* man has prest it on me, that she should be in perpetual confinement what she hath done to deserve, or the necessity of such an hardship I see not; do you? (*sic, LCML V. I, 66*)

The question at the end of the passage makes it clear that Charles is offering Mary a non-judgmental witness—someone she can talk to without concern of being locked away for life. He mentions Mary’s living arrangements again in February 1797:

> You & Sara are very good to think so kindly & so favorably of poor Mary. I would to God, all did so too. But I very much fear, she must not think of coming home in my father’s lifetime. It is very hard upon her. But our circumstances are peculiar, & we must submit to them. God be praised she is so well as she is. She bears her situation as one who has no right to complain” (*LCML V. I, 96*)

In this passage, his concern is clearly with the damage that might be done by those who do not think kindly and favorably of Mary; from the context, one gathers that Mr. Lamb is one of those individuals.

The second stage of recovery, according to Herman, allows the individual to “tell the story of the trauma” completely and in depth so that it can be integrated into the individual’s life story (175). The focus in this stage is remembrance and mourning. Herman notes that this stage requires great courage from the individual and their witness because both must “be clear in their purpose and secure in their alliance” (175). Mary’s and Charles Lamb’s relationship was obviously a secure alliance. At one point in 1803, Mary counseled Stoddart about her own relationship with her brother: “you both want
the habit of telling each other at the moment everything that happens—where you go—and what you do—that free communication of letters and opinions, just as they arise, as Charles and I do, and which is after all the only groundwork of friendship” (LCML V. II, 124). This is also the groundwork for a relationship in which remembrance and mourning can take place. Herman, in fact, believes that it is the only type of relationship that can support this “descent into despair” because it is “the smallest evidence of an ability to form loving connections” that sustains the individual. She explains that just one “positive memory of a caring, comforting person may be a lifeline during the descent into mourning” (194). Again, Charles Lamb was able to provide this link for his sister as Coleridge had provided it to him.

Many biographers and critics—like Talfourd who wrote: “some of her most intimate friends, who knew of the disaster, believed that she had never become aware of her own share in its horrors”—believe Mary Lamb did not mourn or remember her mother or by extension her murder of her mother (223). I believe that the evidence in the Lambs’ correspondence shows otherwise. Nearly a month after the murder, Charles quoted Mary, in his letter to Coleridge, as saying: “I have no bad terrifying dreams. At midnight when I happen to awake, the nurse sleeping by the side of me, with the noise of the poor mad people around me, I have no fear. The spirit of my mother seems to descend, & smile upon me, & bid me live to enjoy the life & reason which the Almighty has given me—. I shall see her again in heaven” (sic, LCML V.1, 52). This is the passage that makes Craciun believe Mary abdicated her responsibility for the murder. However, it may be Mary’s still somewhat-fractured subconscious’ attempt to help her remember her mother and to mourn her mother’s death. In the 1803 letter to Stoddart
quoted above, where Mary explains the contentious relationship between her mother and her aunt, she wrote “my dear Mother (who though you do not know it, is always in my poor head and heart)…” (LCML V. II, 124). Given the tone of the letter, this aside is somewhat discordant and appears to show that Mary’s murder of her mother was integrated into her self-narrative and that she was constantly aware of her role in the murder. It also shows, I believe, that Mary actively mourned her mother as late as 1803—seven years after the murder. In 1805, Mary Lamb wrote to Dorothy Wordsworth after John Wordsworth, one of Dorothy’s brothers, died at sea. It appears that Mary Lamb had successfully completed the mourning process by this time, as she was able to tell Dorothy:

I could not persuade myself that I should do well to write you, though I have often attempted it, but I always left off dissatisfied with what I had written, & feeling that I was doing an improper thing to intrude upon your sorrow, I wished to tell you, that you would one day feel the kind of peaceful state of mind, and sweet memory of the dead which you so happily describe as now almost begun, but I felt that it was improper, and most grating to the feelings of the afflicted, to say to them that the memory of their affliction would in time become a constant part not only of their ‘dream, but of their most wakeful sense of happiness.’ That you would see every object with, & through your lost brother, & that that would at last become a real & everlasting source of comfort to you, I felt, & well knew from my own experience in sorrow, but till you yourself began to feel this I did not dare tell you so. (LCML V. II, 156-66)
As Mary never discusses her father and the only mention of her aunt is in conjunction with her mother, this letter is more evidence of Mary’s lingering sense of responsibility for her mother’s death. I believe this sense of guilt is what kept her from writing to Dorothy. To Mary Lamb, the agent of her own mother’s death, it would seem improper to give advice on mourning a loved one to Dorothy whose brother was killed in a shipwreck. At the same time, Mary Lamb can now tell Dorothy that she feels a “peaceful state of mind, and sweet memory of the dead” showing her successful completion of the grief process.

The third and final stage of healing, according to Herman, is coming to terms with the past and “creating a future” (196). Within the safety of their sibling relationship, Charles and Mary Lamb were able to create a future together as both authors and social hosts. It is important that the two chose these outlets because they, more than anything else, fulfill the central task in the final stage of healing—reconnection. Herman believes that the individual must reconnect and reconcile with herself and that this involves “the active exercise of imagination and fantasy, capacities that have now been liberated” (202). Again, this is a task that the Lamb siblings undertook together. After the murder, Charles Lamb initially planned to give up on poetry altogether. He told Coleridge “mention nothing of poetry. I have destroyed every vestige of past vanities of this kind” (LCML V. I, 45). I attribute this decision to the overwhelming nature of his circumstances at the time. Unlike McFarland who believes “the giving-up of aspiration in poetry was co-ordinate with another of Lamb’s renunciations of largeness in life” and who then says “Lamb retreated into smallness” (45). It is evident in Charles Lamb’s letters that poetry, for him, was hard work and did not give him the artistic satisfaction
that it did Coleridge. As early as May 1796, Charles Lamb was complaining to Coleridge “As to my blank verse I am so dismally slow & sterile of ideas (I speak from my heart) that I much question if it will ever come to any issue” (LCML V. I, 9). Charles Lamb agonized over his poetic ability, but his editorial eye was consistently sharp, and he does not hesitate to tell Coleridge, Southey, or Wordsworth when they should cut lines or find a different route to take in a poem. When critics such as McFarland accuse Charles Lamb of writing essays as “the little-ended Elia transformation of the large-ended poetic Coleridgian vision,” they are exposing the same biases of which Simon P. Hull accuses Lamb’s literary contemporaries: “the traditional bias against the city in Romantic studies” which is “bound up with an equal prejudice against periodical writing” (3). They are not taking into account Charles Lamb’s sharp editorial sense either, which raises the possibility that he recognized that his poetry was not on par with his prose. However, Charles never totally gave up on his poetry; he just allowed it to take a lesser role in his life as he was forced to become the caretaker of his father. In fact as early as November 1796, he was sending Coleridge snatches of poetry again to help finish the book of poems that Coleridge wanted to publish with Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd. He also confirmed in a 10 December 1796 letter that he could not concentrate on poetry: “At present I have not leisure to make verses, nor anything approaching a fondness for the exercise” (LCML V. I, 77). Although he did not discount his return to poetry in the future, he continued “The tender cast of soul, sombered with melancholy and subsiding recollections” is only suitable for writing sonnets or elegies and continued the subject: “The music of poesy may charm for a while the importunate teasing cares of life; the teased and troubled man is not in a disposition to make that music” (77). It is obvious
that writing poetry was not conducive to Charles Lamb’s immediate need for serenity and peace while the letter writing, in prose, does fill that need. Again, I believe that his experiences allowed Charles to offer Mary encouragement to find her own voice in several different areas—letter writing, poetry, and prose. In fact, Charles sent Mary’s “almost or quite a first attempt” at poetry to Coleridge and teased “if you concur with me in thinking it very elegant and very original, I shall be tempted to name the author to you” and follows with the transcription of “Helen” (LCML V.I, 233). This was probably quite gratifying and, at the same time, quite terrifying for the fledgling poet, but it is just one example of how much Charles supported Mary’s writing. In February 1806, Mary Lamb wrote a giddy letter to Stoddart:

This day seems to me kind of a new æra in our time, it is not a birthday, nor a new-years-day, nor a leave-off-smoking day; but it is about an hour after the time of leaving you our poor Phœnix, in the Salisbury Stage, and Charles has just left me for the first time alone to go to his lodging, and I am holding a solitary consultation with myself, as to the how I shall employ myself. Writing plays, novels, poems, and all such-like vapouring and vapourish schemes are floating in my head. (LCML V. II, 210)

It is important to note that the concept of writing occurs to Mary long before the first mention of her work on Tales from Shakespear on 10 May 1806 and after her difficult 1805 episode. This shows that Mary Lamb has been writing and thinking of herself as a writer, as well as a seamstress, for some time—time enough to feel confident that she could write a play or a novel.
Some critics mistakenly believe, like Bonnie Woodbery, that Mary Lamb's writing was “painful and destructive for her,” and although a potential therapy, it was “a therapy that quickly dissolved into destructive behavior” (665, 671). Woodbery argues, “[t]he price of such confrontations was the inevitable collapse into madness” (671).

However, the evidence of Mary Lamb’s psychotic episodes does not support this reading. Remember that one of her most violent and lengthy breaks occurred in 1805, almost an entire year before she decided to write the Tales. Mary did succumb to depression in 1806, but that was not a psychotic episode that needed to be treated with confinement. The depression was more likely triggered by her concern over Coleridge, who once again was spending some time with the Lambs as he contemplated his separation from his wife Sara.

As a friend of Sara and a surrogate sister to Coleridge, Mary Lamb was in a difficult position. She wrote to Dorothy Wordsworth of her concerns on 29 August 1806 that “the painful reflections I have had during a sleepless night has induced me to write merely to quiet myself” and continued: “You my dear friend will perfectly understand me that I do not mean that I might not freely say to you anything that is upon my mind—but the truth is my poor mind is so weak that I never dare trust my own judgment in anything, What I think one hour a fit of low spirits makes me unthink the next” (LCML V. II, 238). Mary Lamb admitted that she had written to both Wordsworth and Southey to ask that they help mediate a separation between the Coleridges then was convinced of her error after receiving a letter from “Mrs Coleridge, telling me as joyful news, that her husband is arrived” (238). The letter upset Mary and made her believe that Sara and Coleridge
were “the only people who ought be concerned in the affair” (238). Mary begged Dorothy to consider both my letter today and yesterday as if you had not read either they being both equally the effect of low spirits, brought on by the fatigue of Coleridge’s conversation and the anxious care even to misery which I have felt since he has been here that something could be done to make such an admirable creature happy. Nor has I assure you Mrs Coleridge been without her full share in adding to my uneasiness. They say she grows fat & is very happy—and people say I grow fat & look happy.

(238-39)

The final sentence is the most telling. Mary Lamb is comparing her situation—mentally off-balance—with that of Sara Coleridge. She is trying hard to find some middle ground that would help make both of the Coleridges happy. In addition to her concern for Coleridge, Charles Lamb’s satire Mr. H was booed from the stage in December 1806. Yet, Mary Lamb managed to stay grounded in reality until an ill-fated trip in July of 1807 triggered another episode. After the long-lasting episode of 1805, one would have expected Mary to collapse in 1806 if writing was actually a destructive task. Instead, she weathers some of the most emotionally intense months since her mother’s murder without an episode. To me, this shows that the release of her creativity in the form of writing was more grounding than it was destructive. As Herman would say, Mary Lamb, as an author, became “the person she want[ed] to be” (202).

To successfully accomplish reconnection and the final phase of healing, Mary and Charles Lamb also needed to reconnect with the world outside their home. They created
what appears to be, in Herman’s terms, a survivor mission—fueled by their empathy. They began to be the stable anchor of a social group of “Others” who were struggling in some way, mentally, financially, or artistically. Herman explains that many individuals “transform the meaning of their tragedy” by actively reaching out to others (207). This type of reconnection works because while “there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it by making it a gift to others. The trauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a survivor mission” (207). The Lamb siblings began their mission in 1799 as soon as Mary moved into Charles’ living quarters after Mr. Lamb’s death. The legacy of the Lambs’ mission is evident in the many memoirs written by their friends and contemporaries. Cornwall begins by saying simply, “[Charles Lamb] was, when living, the centre of a small social circle” (2). Of course, Cornwall is focused on Charles as his subject and so most of his observations mention only Charles Lamb as the initiator and the benefactor. However, Cornwall does an excellent job of explaining the empathy he saw in Charles:

Lamb pitied all objects which had been neglected or despised.

Nevertheless the lens through which he viewed the objects of his pity, —beggars, and chimney-sweepers, and convicts, —was always clear: it served him even when their short-comings were to be contemplated. For he never paltered with truth. He had not weak sensibilities, few tears for imaginary griefs. But his heart opened wide to real distress. He never applauded the fault; but pitied the offender. (9)

Charles understands this section of the population and actively works to help them. Cornwall explains the breadth and depth of that empathy by saying: “If a man was
unfortunate he gave him money. If he was calumniated, he accorded him sympathy. He gave freely; not to merit but to want” and that “[Charles’] reasoning always rose and streamed through the heart” (10). Cornwall firmly attributes Charles Lamb’s empathy to the family tragedy: “He was scarcely out of boyhood when he learned that the world has its dangerous places and barren deserts; and that he had to struggle for his living, without help” (31). Charles Lamb’s empathy was so expansive that Cornwall writes, “[d]uring all his years he was encircled by groups of loving friends” and “he lived and died without an enemy” (44). Cornwall attributes Charles Lamb’s positive outlook to the fact that “[h]is heart, young at all times, never grew hard or callous during life. There was always in it a tender spot, which Time was unable to touch” (138-39). This glowing recommendation is supported by the fact that unlike Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey, and Godwin, Charles Lamb was able to maintain and juggle these difficult personalities and ensure that he remained friends with all of the men.

Talfourd writes that, unlike Coleridge, Charles Lamb “clung to the realities of life; to things nearest to him, which the force of habit had made dear” and that it was the “tendency of his mind to detect the beautiful and good in surrounding things, to nestle rather than to roam” (16). Talfourd, however, attributes Charles’ nature to his early home life where he “saw at home the daily beauty of a cheerful submission to a state bordering on the servile” and lauds the behavior and teaching of Mr. and Mrs. Lamb (17). Yet even Talfourd admits that despite “the dull current of Lamb’s toilsome life” many of his acquaintances felt “that if ever the spirit of Christianity breathed through a human life, it breathed in his” (58, 19). Talfourd gives the best descriptions of the group of friends Charles and Mary Lamb gathered about them, the “motley group of attached
friends, some of them men of rarest parts, and all strongly attached to him and to his sister” (78). It is clear from this description that Mary Lamb was an integral part of the group, even if she is on the periphery of the men’s memoirs. It is also important to note the egalitarian atmosphere that Talfourd describes: “Men of ‘great mark and likelihood’—attended those delightful suppers, where the utmost freedom prevailed—including politicians of every grade, from Godwin up to the editor of the New Times” (81). It is however, Peter George Patmore who best describes Charles Lamb’s connection with the group that surrounded him: “his spirit was so essentially and empathetically a human one, that it was only in the performance and interchange of human offices and instincts it could exist in its happiest form and aspect” (28-29).

Patmore continues by saying that Charles Lamb enjoyed visiting the inner world of thoughts in which Coleridge and Wordsworth lived, but “the home of his spirit was the face of the common earth, and in the absence of human faces and sympathies, it longed and yearned for them with a hunger that nothing else could satisfy” (28). Patmore also explains that Mary Lamb was an integral part of the social circle and that people enjoyed “the society of Lamb and his sister;” although, they did not believe they would, possibly because the Lambs were so much older than Patmore and his associates (21). He specifically notes that Mary Lamb “used to bustle and potter about” in order “to make everybody comfortable” (21). Wordsworth describes Mary Lamb in the note attached to his overly-lengthy and unusable poem that was supposed to have been Charles Lamb’s gravestone epitaph and was reprinted in E. V. Lucas’s biography of Charles Lamb:

Were I to give way to my own feelings, I should dwell not only on her genius and intellectual powers, but upon the delicacy and refinement of
manner which she maintained inviolable under most trying circumstances. She was loved and honoured by all her brother’s friends; and others, some of them strange characters, whom his philanthropic peculiarities induced him to countenance. (388)

In this case, Wordsworth may be the best source of information because of his own attachment to and dependence upon his sister Dorothy. Unlike many of the other men, Wordsworth could see and value Mary Lamb’s worth to Charles and not just her debilitating mental illness.

While the many glowing reports of the Lambs’ friends help fill in the picture, it is the letters of the Lambs that best show the outpouring of empathy towards friends and acquaintances. In May of 1796, Charles Lamb commiserates with Coleridge over his argument with Southey and then later addresses an off-hand remark about Robert Lovell in the prior letter, whose death Charles had not known about when he wrote: “Poor Lovell! my heart almost accuses me for the light manner I spoke of him above, not dreaming of his death. My heart bleeds for your accumulated troubles, God send you thro’ em with patience” (LCML V. I, 9). Even in the midst of his own family’s tragedy in November, Charles Lamb takes the time to empathically support Coleridge in his own, somewhat trivial by comparison, troubles: “Tell me, dearest of my friends, is your mind at peace, or has anything, yet unknown to me, happened to give you fresh disquiet, and steal from you all the pleasant dreams of comfortable rest? … Make it, I entreat you, one of your puny comforts, that I feel for you, and share all your griefs with you” (LCML V. I, 59). The fascinating part of the Lambs’ personalities and their empathy is that they do not think less of Coleridge for his complaints to them in the midst of their own trials. I
use the word “them” because Charles read all of his letters to Mary when they met at the asylum or her boarding house.

In 1801, Charles Lamb gives the first lengthy account of his social mission in action. George Dyer, another impoverished author, had appeared at the Lambs’ flat and was convinced he was going to die. Charles writes to John Rickman and tells how the siblings nursed Dyer back to health:

The fact was he had not had a good meal for some days and his little dirty Niece… told us that unless he dines out he subsists on tea & gruels. And he corroborated this tale by ever & anon complaining of sensations of gnawing which he felt about his heart which he mistook his stomach to be & sure enough the gnawings were dissipated after a meal or two…. He is got quite well again from nursing & chirps of odes & lyric poetry all day long…I shall not be sorry when he takes his nipt carcase out of my bed…but I will endeavor to bring him in future into a method of dining at least once a day. I have proposed to him to dine with me… (LCML V. II, 31)

Even as Charles teases about Dyer’s “nipt carcase,” he explains his plan to make sure that Dyer is fed at least once a day and that he dines with the Lambs as often as possible. Notice that while there is some joking about Dyer’s physical appearance, there is not any judgment of Dyer’s situation. Charles Lamb could easily have told Rickman that Dyer stupidly mistook his stomach for his heart, but he does not word his letter in that way. In fact, Charles ends the discussion by asking Rickman to help find Dyer a job: “I think if you could do any thing for George in the way of an office…it is my firm belief that it
would be his only chance of settlement” (31). This is just one of the many examples in the Lambs’ letters of Charles Lamb attempting to help those around him.

Mary Lamb also shows the extent of her empathy in her letters. In fact, she almost defines the term when she writes to Stoddart in September of 1803:

> you will smile when I tell you I think myself the only woman in the world, who could live with a brother’s wife, and make a real friend of her. partly from [e]arly observation of the unhappy example I have just given you, and partly from a knack I know I have of looking into peoples real characters, and never expecting them to act out of it—never expecting another to do as I would do in the same case. (LCML V. II, 124)

In this passage, Mary Lamb emphasizes that she does not ever expect people to act in a preconceived notion of how she believes that they should. She then continues:

> When you leave your Mother and say if you never shall see her again you shall feel no remorse, and when you make a jewish bargain with your Lover, all this gives me no offence, because it is your nature, and your temper, and I do not expect or want you to be otherwise than you are, I love you for the good that is in you, and look for no change. (124)

Mary Lamb allows Stoddart to make her own mistakes and behave in her own way; she does not attempt to force the younger woman to change or to acquiesce to the social mores of the day. In 1814, Mary Lamb wrote to a young Barbara Betham and empathetically remembered the time she had spent with the young girl. It is especially touching when Mary tells the youngster that she remembers when Betham “wept at the sight of Mrs. Holcroft, from whose school you had recently eloped because you were not
partial to sitting in the stocks” (Lucas Letters Vol. II, 140). Again, Mary does not pass judgment nor is there any sense of her disappointment that Betham had run away from school. There is only a calm acceptance that Betham is who she is and must do what she feels right for her. I find it a bit disheartening that this side of Mary Lamb’s character gets lost in many modern studies. In the effort to prove her agency as a murderer, or her extreme submission to her brother, scholars overlook what I believe to be the reason so many of the Lambs’ contemporaries adored Mary Lamb—her empathic ability to understand people and to offer help and comfort without judgment.

Empathy does not mean that the Lambs did not get their feelings hurt, it does not mean that they were willing to be used by their acquaintances, nor does it mean that they are perfect individuals without any biases. Scholars have long noted how much Charles (and Mary) Lamb disliked Mary Jane Godwin. At one point Charles writes to Manning telling him “I will be buried with this inscription over me: —‘Here lies C.L., the Woman-hater’—I mean that I hated ONE WOMAN,” meaning Mrs. Godwin (Lucas Letters V. II, 70). Charles Lamb addresses his prejudices as Elia in the essay “Imperfect Sympathies.” Elia writes

I confess that I do feel the differences of mankind, national or individual, to an unhealthy excess. I can look with no indifferent eye upon things or persons. Whatever is, is to me a matter of taste or distaste; or when once it becomes indifferent, it begins to be disrelishing. I am, in plainer words, a bundle of prejudices--made up of likings and dislikings--the veriest thrall to sympathies, apathies, antipathies. In a certain sense, I hope it may be said of me that I am a lover of my species. I can feel for all indifferently,
but I cannot feel towards all equally. The more purely-English word that expresses sympathy will better explain my meaning. I can be a friend to a worthy man, who upon another account cannot be my mate or fellow. I cannot like all people alike. (98-99)

Part of Elia’s irony in this essay is that it takes someone who is empathic and very self-aware to admit to the imperfect sympathies Elia expresses. This contrasts William Flesch’s opinion of Elian irony: “Such an awareness could only belong to someone who felt himself to be very little after he too much wanted to be great. In effect, Lamb is retelling the powerful experience of his own loss of the illusion of power” (169). Flesch continues his argument saying: “Perhaps there is something in Lamb more complicated than an ultimately innocent self-consciousness which tries to affect innocence and inevitably succeeds, either because of its deftness or because of the basic guilelessness its ineptitude evidences” (172). Psychologist Robin Fox also disagrees with Flesch’s assessment and writes:

We should note that there is nothing here, as there is nothing in his discussion of Scotsmen, that can be remotely described as "racist." He was talking all the time of cultural differences. He never slandered the "blood" of other groups or said they are racially inferior. Far from it. His description of the Scots mentality does not rank it with respect to the English, for example. It is as with the Jew and the Christian: They are different; they are incompatible. (150)

Fox uses Charles Lamb as a positive example in his article to make the point: “We have to come to terms with the idea that prejudice is not a form of thinking but that thinking is
a form of prejudice” (151). He believes that “Lamb's disarming honesty, and the very benignity of his attitude even to wildly different cultural groups, emphasizes the point that being uncomfortable with the different is not the same as ethnic or religious hatred. It can be quiet and inoffensive, even humorous and kindly” (150). Charles Lamb uses Elia’s voice and his own foible as an attempt to educate the public on empathetic actions. I would argue that “Imperfect Sympathies” should be read in the same manner as the tender essay “The Praise of Chimney Sweepers.”

Like Charles, Mary Lamb was aware of her own biases and how they might function. She writes to Mrs. Clarkson about Coleridge saying: “I know he thinks I am apt to speak unkindly of him: I am not good tempered, and I have two or three times given him proofs that I am not” (LCML V. II, 289). Of course this letter, written in 1808, follows many other letters such as those quoted earlier where Mary Lamb agonizes over Coleridge’s troubles and his instability. What this passage shows is that she is aware of how her own temper may interfere with her good intentions, and that she can work to overcome that tendency in order to work in the individual’s best interest. And let there be no doubt that Mary Lamb was as active as Charles in soliciting/providing relief for her friends. She struggled for months to get Stoddart’s widowed mother a pension from the Admiralty—making daily visits to the offices to ensure the case remained a top priority. It is both the empathic understanding of people and the willingness to help them as part of their social mission that made Charles and Mary Lamb so invaluable to their ever-expanding circle of friends and what made them the subjects of so many memoirs after their deaths.
Sympathy in Coleridge Versus Empathy in Elia

The best way to show how the Lambs’ empathy made their work more emotionally resonant and accessible to their readers is to compare the sympathetic conversation poem of Coleridge, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” with an empathetic prose piece from Charles Lamb, “Christ’s Hospital Five-And –Thirty Years Ago,” an Elian essay written in his conversational tone. In each work, the narrator (and the author) describes the emotional state of another individual as well as his own. This exercise is made a bit more challenging because Coleridge stays within his own emotional persona while projecting his inner-self as observer. Charles Lamb, writing as Elia, essentially becomes Coleridge/Elia for part of the essay, Lamb/Elia for part of the essay, and Elia as an observant third-party for part of the essay. However, it is in the attempt to describe/ascribe emotion in/to the others mentioned in the works that the difference between sympathy and empathy becomes most apparent.xvi

Coleridge introduces his poem by explaining to readers that the poem’s narrator and author are one and the same so one can attribute the feelings and viewpoint of the narrator directly to those of Coleridge. The poem was written in June of 1797—nearly a year after the Lambs’ fatal September—and commemorates an occasion when Charles Lamb is able to visit Coleridge and leave his family and their issues behind in London. The poem begins with Coleridge feeling sorry for himself because he is confined to the lime-tree bower. He moans: “I have lost / Beauties and feeling, such as would have been / Most sweet to my remembrance” (2-4). The histrionic fatalism of the poem is a bit
disconcerting to most modern readers, but Coleridge may be considering the sudden murder of Mrs. Lamb when he describes his friends (including Charles Lamb) as “Friends, whom I never more may meet again” (6). In the poem, Coleridge leaves his physical body and mentally joins his friends as they walk through the wondrous scenery. He is able to bring the visual aspect of the scene into sharp focus for his readers as he guides them on the nature-walk. They walk on “springy heath” on the hill and then “wind down” a path to a “roaring dell, o’erwooded, narrow, deep, / And only speckled by the mid-day sun” (7, 8, 10-11). Coleridge notices/imagines/remembers the smallest visual detail and transforms it into language for his readers: the “slim trunk” of the ash, which “Flings arching like a bridge” from “rock to rock” and has “poor yellow leaves,” which tremble in the turbulence generated by the waterfall (11-13). In comparison to the struggling ash, “the dark green file of long lank weeds” thrive as they “nod and drip beneath the dripping edge / Of the blue clay stone” (17, 19-20). The contrast of colors and textures even provide the reader with a sense of temperature and humidity change as the description moves from the sunny hill to the shady dell and back out in to the open where the walkers can “view again / The many-steepled tract magnificent / Of hilly fields and meadows” framed by the sea in the distance (22-24). Compared to the sensual wealth, however, the emotional content is sadly lacking.

In the second stanza, after following the group out of the dell and into the sunlight, Coleridge turns to the group and attempts to enter into their emotions as they view the natural splendor before them. Coleridge, however, is never able to enter into the psyches of his friends; he remains an outsider, and as such he projects his own feelings/perspective upon his friends. Coleridge exclaims:
Yes! they wander on
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
And hungered after Nature, many a year,
In the great City pent, winning thy way
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
And strange calamity! (26-32)

This is an excellent example of sympathy because Coleridge is projecting how he believes Charles should feel because this is the way Coleridge believes he would feel if he were in Charles’ situation. This is clearly Coleridge’s viewpoint and not Charles Lamb’s. Charles was born and raised in the city of London and felt comfortable and protected in a sense by his relative anonymity in the city. Coleridge is the person who always felt alone, abandoned, and starved for the countryside of his youth when he was in the city, as was evident in chapter one. Most importantly, one knows that it is Coleridge’s sympathetic projection of feelings because Charles Lamb would never refer to any of his family, especially Mary, as evil and would never have described the events surrounding his mother’s death and his father’s decline as evil—unfortunate, unexpected, sudden, and painful, yes—evil, no.

At the end of the stanza, Coleridge is explicit about his sympathetic projection. Coleridge issues a beautiful, textural, visual command to nature to perform for Charles:

Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue ocean! (34-37)

Then he mentally steps back to congratulate himself for orchestrating this natural performance so that Charles,

Struck with deep joy may stand, *as I have stood,*

Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round

On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem

Less gross than bodily; and of such hues

As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes

Spirits perceive his presence.  (emphasis added, 38-43)

Coleridge projects the same joy, peace, beauty, and godly stillness *he feels* on such occasions onto Charles Lamb. Because Coleridge needs the beauty of nature to feel closer to God, he sympathetically decides that the city-bred Charles Lamb does as well. Coleridge does not do this dismissively; he just cannot fathom that Charles may need a different type of activity or different type of scenery to feel this peace. Nature is Coleridge’s cathedral so it must also be that of Charles Lamb. Coleridge’s sympathetic view of Charles Lamb means that he has limited ability to help Charles really find peace and stillness. He can only be affective if Charles responds in the same way to the same catalyst that works for Coleridge.

Both the problem with and the lure of sympathetic identification are illustrated in the third, and final, stanza of the poem. Coleridge congratulates himself for his ability to sooth Charles Lamb: “A delight / Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad / As I myself were there!” (44-45). Coleridge then remarks that even trapped in “this bower” and denied the interaction with his friends, “have I not marked / Much that has soothed me”
His sympathetic identification with Charles Lamb has allowed Coleridge to feel better about himself and his own situation. Sympathy is essentially a selfish endeavor. There is no evidence in the poem that Charles Lamb has been comforted or soothed, but Coleridge congratulates himself and feels much better about his own situation because he believes Charles Lamb will respond in the exact same manner that he would in Charles’ position. Coleridge feels so good about himself and the supposed ease that he has projected upon Charles Lamb that he begins to rhapsodize saying,

Henceforth I will know
That Nature ne’er deserts the wise and pure;
No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
No waste so vacant, but may well employ
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
Awake to Love and Beauty! (59-64)

This again is true for Coleridge, but even in his joy, he speaks a truth that he does not recognize. If Nature is everywhere including narrow plots and vacant wastes, it is also in the streets of London and, therefore, available to Charles Lamb for comfort anywhere he lives or travels—but again Charles has to believe in the power of Nature with the same sense of worship and to give it the same investment of power that Coleridge does—and there is no evidence that Charles Lamb ever felt that way.

Coleridge blissfully continues with his little lecture to himself and the absent Charles, reminding himself and by extension Charles that is “well to be bereft of promised good, / That we may lift the Soul, and contemplate / With lively joy the joys we cannot share” (65-67). Again, the self-centered sympathy is evident in these lines.
Coleridge has only missed the joys of walking around the countryside with his friends, which, when compared to the many things that Charles Lamb was “bereft of” at this time—money, companionship, and relief from the constant strain of being the primary caretaker for his elderly, senile father—transforms this statement into a sympathetic platitude. Coleridge follows this advice with a direct address to “My gentle-hearted Charles!” which indicates that he has been speaking to Charles as well as himself throughout the stanza (68). Coleridge, from his natural bower in the tree, removed from many of the difficulties of Charles Lamb’s life benignly blesses him via “the last rook,” who is flying back to his nest as dusk settles (68). As he blesses the bird, Coleridge imagines Charles and the rest of the walking party to be “gazing” as the bird flies by and thus receiving “a charm / for thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom / No sound is dissonant which tells of life” (74-76). I believe the word “charm” in this stanza has two separate meanings. The first is Coleridge imagining how charming Charles Lamb would find the lone bird—either silhouetted against the setting sun or flying home for the evening. The second meaning is that Coleridge wants the bird to be a charm against the troubles Charles is facing and to remind him that, no matter how hard life is at the moment, he should rejoice to be alive. Coleridge is sympathetically comparing his situation—trapped at home with a scalded foot and unable to join his friends who are wandering the countryside—with Charles Lamb’s situation—a young man who is working to support his elderly, senile father, and to help support Mary who is forced to live elsewhere—a young man who is working all day and returning home to be the primary caregiver for his father and who walks miles to visit his sister after work to make sure she does not feel abandoned. When their situations are listed in detail, it seems ridiculous that Coleridge could think that he
understands how Charles Lamb feels or what would ease his burden. However, I do believe that Coleridge’s sympathy for his friend was honest and well meant. As discussed in chapter one, Coleridge’s own early traumas limited his ability to fully perceive Charles Lamb’s situation. He only can understand how *he* believes he would act and what would relieve him were he in Charles’ place. However, this limit keeps the poem at the sympathetic level. Coleridge’s sympathetic viewpoint also limits his readers’ experiences to the strong visual images in the poem and to the poet’s own sense of joy. It leaves Charles as an undeveloped, shadowy presence in a poem that is ostensibly about him and his emotions as much as it is about Coleridge’s situation.

In comparison, Charles Lamb’s empathy allows readers to slip in and out of the characters in his essay “Christ’s Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago.” Empathy is evident in any number of the Elia essays, but “Christ’s Hospital” is particularly apt for this comparison because at the beginning of the essay, Elia becomes the young Coleridge, using his experience and emotions to make Elia into a believable narrator so one can compare how successful Lamb is in becoming Coleridge after Coleridge’s unsuccessful attempt to become Lamb. He begins the essay with Coleridge’s experiences on first attending the school:

> I was a poor friendless boy. My parents, and those who should care for me, were far away. Those few acquaintances of theirs, which they could reckon upon being kind to me in the great city, after a little forced notice, which they had the grace to take of me on my first arrival in town, soon grew tired of my holiday visits. They seemed to them to recur too often,
though I thought them few enough; and, one after another, they all failed me, and I felt myself alone among six hundred playmates. (29)

Charles Lamb instantly takes on Coleridge’s emotions and experiences his shock after leaving his uncle as noted in Coleridge’s letter to Poole in chapter one. This is not Charles Lamb looking at the young Coleridge and imagining how he might have felt; it is Charles Lamb repeating nearly the same sentiments Coleridge wrote of in “Frost at Midnight.” Elia expresses Coleridge’s extreme homesickness, changing only the name of the village: “O the cruelty of separating a poor lad from his early homestead! The yearnings which I used to have towards it in those unfledged years! How, in my dreams, would my native town (far in the west) come back, with its church, and trees, and faces! How I would wake weeping, and in the anguish of my heart exclaim upon sweet Calne in Wiltshire!” (29). Elia even captures Coleridge’s May 1805 private notebook entry that describes the misery of the school holidays for a child who was forced to wander the streets of London. Coleridge wrote:

> It is a subject not unworthy of meditation to myself, what the reason is that these sounds & bustles of Holidays, Fairs, Easter-Mondays, & Tuesdays, & Christmas Days, even when I was a Child & when I was at Christ-Hospital, always made me so heart-sinking, so melancholy? Is it, that from my Habits, or my want of money all the first two or three and 20 years of my Life I have been alone at such times? (STCN 2, 2647)

Charles Lamb’s empathetic understanding of Coleridge translates those feelings into Elia’s lament:
To this late hour of my life, I trace impressions left by the recollection of those friendless holidays. The long warm days of summer never return but they bring with them a gloom from the haunting memory of those whole-day-leaves, when, by some strange arrangement, we were turned out, for the live-long day, upon our own hands, whether we had friends to go to, or none. I remember those bathing-excursions to the New-River, which L. recalls with such relish, better, I think, than he can—for he was a home-seeking lad, and did not much care for such water-pastimes: —How merrily we would sally forth into the fields; and strip under the first warmth of the sun; and wanton like young dace in the streams; getting us appetites for noon, which those of us that were pennyless (our scanty morning crust long since exhausted) had not the means of allaying (29-30).

Elia recounts how the winter “holidays” were even worse for the young Coleridge “prowling about the streets objectless—shivering at cold windows of print shops,” or “as a last resort,” the cold and hungry boy would “pay a fifty-times repeated visit” to see “the Lions in the Tower” (30). Charles Lamb manages to have Elia fully immersed into the emotions of the young Coleridge while, at the same time, allowing Coleridge to keep his public fiction in place—that his time at Christ’s Hospital was an educational and edifying experience.

Unlike the sympathetic writing of Coleridge, Charles Lamb’s essay focuses more on the emotions and experiences of the young men he knew at school. Charles’ own experiences and emotions are nearly non-existent in the essay, and “L.,” as Elia calls him,
is shown to have had a very different school experience than the majority of boys. “L.” is set apart at the very beginning. I believe Charles Lamb had two purposes for this: first as a way of explaining the earlier essay “Recollections of Christ’s Hospital,” and then as a reason why “L.” might have felt he could write such a glowing tributary to his old school without being a hypocrite. Charles/Elia begins the essay by recalling the work to the minds of his readers and then dismissing the essay as propaganda by commenting: “I think he has contrived to bring together whatever can be said in praise of them, dropping the other side of the argument most ingeniously” (27). James Treadwell argues that the Elia essay provides Lamb with a compensatory alternative not allowed in the totalizing rhetoric of 1813, where every Christ’s Hospital boy is interchangeable” and notes that “[i]t would be a mistake to see this [essay] simply as an attempt to discredit L. Elia is not so much contradicting his precursor as showing that his precursor has no identity at all; by replacing his own character with that of the institution, he has revealed that his account depends entirely on omissions” (511). As Charles Lamb is the author of both essays and his Elian identity was well known, this dismissal/contradiction of his own essay would require some explanation. Elia neatly explains how “L.” was able to write such an essay by telling readers “that he [Lamb] had some particular advantages, which I and others of his schoolmates had not” (27). From this point on, every negative aspect of the school Elia highlights is either preceded or followed by a recollection of how those privations did not apply to “L."

Beginning in the next sentence, Elia explains how “L.” was able to leave the school “almost as often as he wished” making the school just a school to him and not the inescapable prison that it seemed to Coleridge and Hunt in chapter one. While the other
boys were starving, “L.” had “his tea and hot rolls” in the morning and the pitiful diet of the students was constantly supplemented by his family: hot bread and butter from the Temple, “double-refined [sugar] and a smack of ginger” or some “fragrant cinnamon” supplement the millet porridge, a “hot plate of roast veal” or “griskin” supplemented the inedible and scanty portions of meat the other boys received (28). The only insight we get into young Charles Lamb’s feelings about this partiality comes when Elia discusses how the provisions arrived at the school: “I remember the good old relative (in whom love forbade pride) squatting down upon some odd stone in a by-nook of the cloisters” (28). The young boy is struck with conflicting emotions “love for the bringer; shame for the thing brought, and the manner of its bringing; sympathy for those who were too many to share in it; and, at top of all, hunger (eldest, strongest of the passions!) predominant, breaking down the stony fences of shame, awkwardness, and a troubling over-consciousness” (28-29). These emotions ring true as those of the young boy who, although starving, was a bit embarrassed by his elderly, uncouth aunt and who was upset by the fact that he was unable to share with the other 600 boys, but who, ultimately, was too hungry to resist the offering. Charles Lamb recalls his aunt’s visits to the school to Coleridge in a February 1797 letter when his aunt was dying:

My poor Aunt, whom you have seen, the kindest goodest creature to me when I was at school, who used to toddle there to bring me fag, when I school-boy like only despised her for it, & used to be ashamed to see her come & sit herself down on the old coal hole steps as you went into the old grammar school, & opened her apron & brought out her bason, with some nice thing she had caused to be saved for me… (LCML V. I, 96)
In the essay, the only addition to the description in the letter is that one of the reasons he was ashamed to see his aunt was that there was not enough food to share.

Elia also tells the readers that “L.” was spared the worst abuse because “[a]ny complaint which he had to make was sure of being attended to. This was understood at Christ’s, and was an effectual screen to him against the severity of the masters, or worse tyranny of the monitors” (30). Hunt’s memoirs also support this evidence. Therefore, “L.” was not exposed to the abuse of either Bowyer or the older boys and lived a comparatively pain-free existence. Charles Lamb may not have had the same horrific experiences that Coleridge and Hunt described, but he was witness to the pain and suffering of the other students and uses Elia to expose that to the reading public as noted in chapter one. Charles Lamb/Elia is able to enter into the emotions of the boys who suffered and admits that the “oppressions of these young brutes are heart-sickening to call to recollection” (30). Charles Lamb may not bear the physical scars of the punishments, but as a powerless witness, he still bears some mental scars, which Elia makes clear in his narration.

Charles Lamb’s voice overrides his Elia persona in the section of the essay where he discusses the punishments of runaway children. Charles /Elia can call the dungeons in which the boys were confined “little, square, Bedlam cells” with authority for three reasons: his own confinement in Hoxton as a young man, Mary’s multiple confinements in several different private institutions, and the description of the many rooms in Bethlem Hospital that were publicly exposed by the Parliamentary investigation and the reports that were published in 1815 and 1816. The large number of abuses to which patients at the public asylums and mad-houses were subjected were described in detail for the
reading public in these reports, and the public was horrified, fascinated, and outraged all at the same time. Elia’s description of the young men confined so that “a boy could just lie at his length upon straw and a blanket” with only “a peep of light” to accompany him and “without sight of any but the porter who brought him his bread and water—who might not speak to him” probably recalled the infamous tale of Bethlem’s most famous patient at the time, the American sailor William Norris (35).

Edward Wakefield described Norris’ situation to the parliamentary committee:

- a stout iron ring was rivetted round his neck, from which a short chain passed to a ring made to slide upwards or downwards on an upright massive iron bar, more than six feet high, inserted into the wall. Round his body a strong iron bar about two inches wide was rivetted; on each side the bar was a circular projection, which being fashioned to and inclosing each of his arms, pinioned them close to his sides. This waist bar was secured by two similar bars, which, passing over his shoulders, were rivetted to the waist bar both before and behind. The iron ring round his neck was connected to the bars on his shoulders, by a double link. From each of these bars another short chain passed to the ring on the upright iron bar. We were informed he was enabled to raise himself, so as to stand against the wall, on the pillow of his bed in the trough bed in which he lay, but it is impossible for him to advance from the wall in which the iron bar is soldered, on account of the shortness of his chains, which were only twelve inches long. It was, I conceive, equally out of his power to repose in any other position than on his back, the projections which on each side
of the waist bar inclosed his arms, rendering it impossible for him to lie on his side, even if the length of the chains from his neck and shoulders would permit it. His right leg was chained to the trough; in which he had remained thus encaged and chained more than twelve years. *(sic, Report 12)*

Wakefield told the committee that Norris could not move enough to fully stand and was, therefore, forced to spend most of his time prone on the straw provided for his mattress—just like the young runaways. At Wakefield’s insistence, “the whole of the irons had been removed from Norris's body, and that the length of chain from his neck, which was only twelve inches, had been doubled” *(Report 12)*. Norris died soon after his chains were removed and before the report was published, but a drawing of him locked in his chains was published in the British newspapers.

I believe Charles Lamb’s experiences and emotions are clearly stated in this section of the essay, and the link between this essay and his two other writings on night terrors, “On Witches and Other Night Terrors” and “Maria Howe—The Effect of Witch Stories,” helps confirm this belief. For Charles/Elia, the worst part of the punishment was not the confinement during the day—it was the confinement at night. Elia explains: “here he was shut up by himself of nights out of the reach of any sound, to suffer whatever horrors the weak nerves, and superstition incident to his time of life might subject him to” *(35)*. In his essay on night terrors, Charles/Elia makes the statement: “Parents do not know what they do when they leave tender babes alone to go to sleep in the dark. The feeling about for a friendly arm—the hoping for a familiar voice—when they wake screaming—and find none to soothe them—what a terrible shaking it is to their poor
nerves!” (Elia 113). In “Maria Howe” the young narrator says, “I cannot recall to mind the horrors which I then felt, without shuddering, and feeling something of the old fit return” (Mrs. Leicester 117-18). These statements are too emotionally charged, too empathetic, and too often repeated not be attributed to Lamb’s own biography. Monsman even speculates that “[t]he six weeks that Lamb as an adolescent rejected in love, spent in the madhouse at Hoxton may well have been foreshadowed by some far earlier event in the life of the impressionable four year old that released this personification of the fear of madness” in his night terrors (62-63). In this point Monsman and I agree; something must have helped cement these feelings in Charles Lamb’s psyche as the elements are present in three of his works—and “Night Terrors” and “Maria Howe” both tell essentially the same story.

Monsman attributes Elia’s ability to discuss charged topics such as punishments and night terrors to the fact that “[Lamb] gives voice to his own doubts, fears, sorrows, and guilts by exteriorizing or objectifying his inner states, a mode of dramatic detachment that creates a double who can cry out upon the world with the full force of his corrosive misery” (17). He believes that readers “interpret these personae as serving a covertly confessional role” and therefore one must “class Lamb’s creative enterprise as essentially autobiographical” (17). While I agree with the idea that the Elian essays in particular derive some of their impact from the bits of autobiography Charles Lamb uses and that Elia is, in many senses, a double, Monsman’s reading of the Elian essays and indeed of Charles’ life as a whole is too biased by his own sympathies to give him a full insight into the writer’s motives. In my opinion, Edith Christina Johnson had a better understanding of Charles Lamb and his writing, and she points out that Elia is and was always first and
foremost Charles. She notes that many of Charles Lamb’s letters and essays have “the same felicitous qualities of psychological penetration, of humor, of piquant word and phrase, that characterize the Elian essays” (xiii). Of the “Christ’s Hospital” essay, Johnson notes that the ability to take on the personalities and emotions of his friends was the “type of mystification Lamb indulged in with delight, and with intense gratification to his dramatic instinct” (149-150). Winifred Courtney points out two important facts about the “Christ’s Hospital” essay and its predecessor: “‘Recollections of Christ’s Hospital’ in 1813” was written “while Boyer still lived” and the Elian essay was written after Bowyer’s death (41). Courtney says “the first extols the school in a serious vein; the second, in part humorous, sets the record straight on school weaknesses” (41). I believe that the death of Bowyer released Charles Lamb to share Coleridge’s experiences without concern for Bowyer’s reaction. In addition Courtney points out that there were enough powerful Christ’s Hospital alumni in London that “[h]ad [Lamb] exaggerated, others would have corrected him,” and, she continues, “we do not hear of any who protested” (41). In fact, as noted in chapter one, Christ’s Hospital itself printed both of Charles Lamb’s essays in their book of famous alumni memories.

After the discussion of the punishments for runaways, Lamb moves back into his Elia persona to discuss the abuses the boys suffered under Bowyer and then into an even more distant view as he looks back through time at the verbal sparring of Coleridge and Valentine Le Grice. After the horror of the preceding passages, it is as if Charles/Elia needs the reminder of more positive moments so the essay can end on a nostalgic note of friendship. However, I must point out that Charles Lamb’s empathy for the Bluecoated boys went even deeper than the essay just discussed. In chapter one, I noted that he
attended an annual reunion dinner with his schoolmates, but Charles Lamb went one step further—he continued to visit the school as an adult to offer the boys a non-judgmental adult figure. Hunt recalls many of Charles’ visits when he was a student: “Lamb’s visits to the school after he left it, I remember well, with his fine intelligent face. Little did I think I should have the pleasure of sitting with it in after-times as an old friend, and seeing it careworn and still finer” (128). There are also several letters in which Charles Lamb agonizes over not being able to afford to buy an annual subscription to one of the London newspapers for Christ’s Hospital (LCML V. II, 42).

In comparing Coleridge’s poem to Lamb’s essay, it is apparent that Charles Lamb’s empathy allows the reader to enter into more than just the persona of the narrator; it makes nearly all of the characters in the work vibrant and “real” to the reader. This empathy helps readers become emotionally involved with both the characters and the narrator. I would argue that the empathic presentation is what makes the Elian essays so charming and seemingly confessional. In contrast, a sympathetic narrator only allows readers into his/her own thoughts and emotions and the other characters in the work are expected to perform as the narrator would in the same situation. The difference between empathy and sympathy does not necessarily make one work better than another or one author better than another, but it is important for readers to note whether the work they are reading is sympathetic or empathetic in order to give them a better sense of the narrator’s reliability and, quite possibly, the author’s own emotional limitations.

In my opinion, Charles and Mary Lamb were remarkable individuals who shared an amazingly productive sibling relationship, but it is their seemingly endless capacity for empathy that is the most impressive. Rather than be destroyed by personal
disappointments and family tragedy, the Lambs’ empathy grew stronger. Understanding of the effects of trauma allowed them to support each other when needed and still have the compassion to reach out to those they encountered. They were always available to Coleridge when he needed a place to escape his marriage or his addiction. They offered support to the Wordsworths during one of their most traumatic moments after the death of John Wordsworth. They even overcame their extreme dislike for Mary Jane Godwin and continued to offer Godwin friendship—even when Mrs. Godwin attempted to sabotage that relationship. To the alumni of Christ’s Hospital, their doors were always open, and they were always ready to help canvas for employment or pensions for their friends in financial need—even when the Lambs themselves could have used financial help. It takes remarkable people to manage a group of temperamental, artistic, and political personalities without losing a single friend. It takes a great deal of empathy to understand the moodiness of personalities like Coleridge, Godwin, and Stoddart and to not expect more from those individuals than they are capable of offering. The empathic compassion of Charles and Mary Lamb made them the center of two generations of personalities. It also allowed them to form a sibling bond that should be celebrated for its healing properties and its commitment to the health and the personal growth of both Charles and Mary Lamb. It is Charles and Mary Lamb who embody P.B. Shelley’s definition of an empathetic poet more than anyone else in their Romantic circle—their empathy applied to everyone.
In Conclusion: What Does Trauma Theory Add to Readings?

I hope that the accounts of how trauma played a vital, if not always conscious, role in the lives and works of Coleridge, Godwin, Mary Shelley, and the Lambs presented here demonstrates that it is an important lens through which we can empathetically view writers and their works. I have presented just a few examples in the preceding chapters, and Thomas J. Brennan has done a very good complementary study of William Wordsworth, Lord Tennyson, and T. S. Eliot in his book *Trauma, Transcendence, and Trust*. But really, the possibilities of empathetic readings are endless, and in this period of literature, they are often overlooked.

I challenge my readers, then, to take another look at familiar authors and their characters through the empathetic lens of trauma. Doing so will provide a whole new perspective on the writer and/or the work. If, for instance, we interpret Charlotte Brontë’s time at the Clergy Daughters’ School at Cowan Ridge as a time of traumatic captivity because it mirrors Coleridge’s experience at Christ’s Hospital in a number of ways, how does that change Brontë’s point of view as an author? What changes might it have made to her psyche, which formed her characters? If we apply the same definition to Lowood in *Jane Eyre*, does it help explain some of Jane’s drawings and/or conversations with Rochester? If Emily Brontë’s characters in *Wuthering Heights* are viewed through an empathetic trauma lens (even if we do not take the author’s own experience into account), does it make Heathcliff’s actions more understandable? After all, modern sociologists tell us that removing a child from his home and familiar surroundings, no matter how well intentioned, is extremely traumatic. Does it change
anything in Catherine Earnshaw’s character and make her more or less sympathetic? If we read Heathcliff’s and Catherine’s time under Hindley Earnshaw’s dubious “care” as traumatic captivity combined with the traumatic loss of Mr. Earnshaw, I believe that their confusing/confounding relationship will be clarified and that their driving need for each other is better explained through a trauma lens than through any other explanation.

By the same token, how does viewing Robert Wringhim empathetically, in James Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, change his relationship with Gil-Martin? If we view Wringhim as a child who was traumatized by his mother and her pastor with their strict and warped view of religion, does it better explain his murderous rage at his father and brother? If we use a Jungian view of the extreme measures which a child’s psyche will engage in order to protect the inner child from trauma, does that change Gil-Martin’s role in the novel? Is he still a devil, or is he a part of the injured Robert’s psyche bent on revenge? In Charlotte Dacre’s *Zofloya*, does a traumatic reading of Leonardo, as a child irreparably traumatized by his mother’s actions, make him more or less heroic? This list could continue *ad infinitum*, but it is clear that we will do well to take a second look at authors and their characters through a trauma lens. Otherwise incomprehensible actions may begin to make a great deal more sense, psychologically, and actions that may have been considered mere plot devices in earlier readings, may suddenly reveal deeper meanings as well as serving as to move the plot forward.
Notes:

i Although we cannot diagnose Godwin with this personality disorder, many of his friends’ noted Godwin’s narcissism in their letters to each other—particularly Charles Lamb when writing to Coleridge.

ii A near mirror image of this scene would play out more fatally for his friends Charles and Mary Lamb approximately fifteen years later, when Mary murdered her mother, and his own near-murderous rage may be one reason that Coleridge offered to have Mary Lamb come stay with him after she was released from the asylum.

iii Weissman has an interesting interpretation of Coleridge’s passionate love for Sara. He writes:

no one has ever troubled to notice the sorry fact that Coleridge was suffering from a drug-induced psychosis at the time he first produced an explanation of his downfall and that he was therefore a less than reliable witness. … written at a time when he was fully addicted and lost in the midst of opium-induced hallucinations—Coleridge hazily reconstructed how he had come to such a sorry state. It was a case of ‘love at first sight,’ Coleridge told himself, that had wrecked his marriage and driven him into drugs. (xiv)

Weissman believes that a “careful reading of Coleridge’s diaries and letters on a day by day basis reveals an entirely different story: Sarah Hutchinson was merely the go-between, fantasy-vehicle for Coleridge’s obsessive attachment to William Wordsworth—an unconsciously homosexual attachment which is also traceable in the poetry Coleridge was writing at the time” (xiv). However given that the Lamb’s wrote to Sara Hutchinson about Coleridge while he was in Malta, I find it hard to believe that the relationship was a delusion of Coleridge’s.

iv Godwin’s spelling, punctuation, and grammar were erratic in his letters and his private writing. To keep textual disruptions to a minimum, I have only indicated Godwin’s own spelling with sic when absolutely necessary.

v It is impossible to know if Godwin wrote more as his diary for this date, which usually lists his daily correspondence, only reads “20 minutes before 8” followed by three black lines and the notation of those who dined with him that day. (Diary).

vi Interestingly, Narcissistic Personality Disorder falls under Cluster B in the DSM-IV-TR and can cluster with Antisocial Personality Disorder (formerly known as sociopathy) as well as Borderline Personality Disorder.

vii P. B. Shelley’s death appears to have forced Godwin to turn, again, inwards and muse on his life, and Godwin concludes that the world would have been poorer without his contributions had he died at an earlier age.
However, the latter situation is more complicated as Viviani was also acting the part of a victim and wanted money from both the Shelleys.

While Godwin’s reaction was normal for conservative parents, it was not in keeping with his philosophical arguments in *Political Justice*.

It is interesting that scholars are so drawn to M. Shelley’s portrayal of incest in *Mathilda*, but have overlooked Godwin’s portrayal of M. Shelley as a seductress in this letter.

Walton is important to Victor because Walton is the witness to Victor’s testimony. For additional reading on the important role a witness plays in the trauma survivor’s narrative, see *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* edited by Cathy Caruth and published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1995.

This is an interesting foreshadowing of M. Shelley’s own belief that the deaths of her children in Italy were a cosmic or karmic response to the death of Harriet Shelley and the demise of her marriage to P. B. Shelley.

Survivor’s guilt occurs after the trauma is over. The survivor wonders why she was spared when so many others were not. The guilt and the confusion combined with the grieving process leaves the survivors adrift from “real life” and separated from their own emotions and those of other people; the guilt can even devolve into fugue states.

When Shelley revised the text for the 1831 edition, she made the scene more sexual.

Many biographers use the version of the *Morning Chronicle* article reprinted in Edwin W. Marrs’ edition of the *Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, but there are slight wording changes between the original article and the version printed in the *Morning Chronicle’s Annual Review*, for instance the rumor of the insane brother is not included. Kathy Watson reprinted the entire page from the 1796 Annual Review of the newspaper in her book *The Devil Kissed Her: The Story of Mary Lamb* on page 42, and that is the version of the article used in this study.

As the bulk of this essay was covered in chapter one, I will just look at the most applicable portions for this chapter.
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