

“Swim the Warm Waters of Sins of the Flesh”: Gender and Sexuality in *Frankenstein* and The Rocky Horror Picture Show

A commonly referenced and notorious tale, *Frankenstein* recounts the story of Victor Frankenstein as he creates life in his laboratory and the death and destruction that follows him as a result. There have been many adaptations of this story in both print and film and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is often considered the most modified and raunchy of them. Many scholars and fans agree that the film contains the bare bones of the Frankenstein tale, such as the scientific creation of life, and strays wildly from the original text because of the embracement of sexual freedom and exhibition of homosexuality and transsexuality. However, these deviant sexualities appear in the original 1818 novel in more subdued ways. This essay works to directly utilize the emphatic representation of shifting gender roles and sexuality in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* to illuminate or reevaluate our understanding of subliminal homosexual desires, androgyny, and negative coding of sexuality present in *Frankenstein*. By analyzing the characterization of and relationships between characters in both the novel and film, I will demonstrate the corresponding depictions of gender roles and sexuality in each text that generate contrasting cultural commentary based on the time in which they were written.

Following the basic plotline of *Frankenstein*, the film follows Brad and Janet as they stumble upon Frank-N-Furter's castle in which he has created life, or his own sexual partner, in his laboratory. Throughout the film, Brad and Janet go through a sexual awakening as they have various sexual encounters that culminates in a pool orgy. While there are numerous scholarly articles on the representation of gender and sexuality in *Frankenstein*, as it is an older and more well-known text, there is much less literature on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in part because it is more recent and not generally classified as a scholarly text. A majority of the literature that

does exist on the film occurs within an essay on *Frankenstein* and focuses on a comparison of thematic similarities and differences between the two based on the film's status as a variant of the original 1818 text. Alternatively, I will do the inverse by utilizing aspects of the 1970's film to interpret gender roles and sexuality in the earlier text.

There is a large body of literature on taboo sexuality reflected in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, though scholars use different examples from the text to defend their arguments. Some scholars, such as James Twitchell and Leanne MacDonald, cite Victor's relationship with his creature, Walton, and Clerval as evidence for his homosexuality. Others use the lack of relationship between Victor and Elizabeth as evidence, including works by Michael Eberle-Sinatra. Alongside homosexuality, scholars like Rolf Eichler and Twitchell, identify incest as another type of disapproved sexuality in the novel that exists mainly between Victor and both his creature and Elizabeth. Current scholars on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* all acknowledge the immediate presence of a homosexual relationship between Frank-N-Furter and Rocky, though they diverge on analysis of Frank's function in the story. He is considered either a mother as argued by Shaun Soman or a godlike figure as argued by Eberle-Sinatra. Many scholarly articles touch on the dichotomy between outward sexual freedom and the societal desire for restricted sexuality. This is especially prevalent in Alissa Burger's analysis of Janet as a woman becoming sexually liberated as the film continues, or Kasie Betten's discussion of incest between many characters in the film. Most of the current literature on both *Frankenstein* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* emphasizes either the representation of homosexuality or the incestuous relationships as they appear in the texts with secondary or limited analysis on the other. Instead of separating the two topics, I will evaluate the use of both homosexuality and incest in the text as commentary on the representation of taboo sexuality as a whole.

Frank-N-Furter's homosexual desire for Rocky is revealed by his objectification of and emphasis on Rocky's body visually and lyrically in the song "I Can Make You a Man." From the moment he emerges from the tank, Rocky wears only small, golden underwear while the rest of him is exposed and muscular. Frank created him to have this particularly strapping appearance and reiterates the work Rocky will do to maintain his body throughout the song, specifically when he gifts weights to Rocky for his "birthday." His clear attention to Rocky's muscular appearance demonstrates the importance of Rocky's physicality and the attraction Frank has to him based on his muscles. To further reveal his desire, Frank slowly runs his finger down Rocky's chest and stomach to feel the abdominals underneath, stopping at the top of Rocky's underwear at the onset of "I Can Make You a Man." This physical action early on shows Frank's positive reaction to Rocky's body and the desire to touch and fondle him. As the song continues, Frank has his assistant, Columbia, lather Rocky in oil, adding to the aesthetic appeal of his body for Frank by highlighting Rocky's muscular features especially as he flexes to the beat of the song. At the end of the scene, Frank explicitly states his attraction to the creature when he sings, "But a deltoid and a bicep, a hot groin and a tricep makes me ooooooh... shake..." (O'Brien 54). Demonstrated by these lyrics and Frank's constant attempts to touch him, Rocky's muscular physique is central to Frank's attraction to him. This attraction to Rocky is the first indication of Frank's homosexuality in the film that escalates from this moment. Frank's purposeful addition of muscles to and later fondling of Rocky's body places muscularity and physical attraction at the center of Frank's homosexual desire.

A similar significance is placed on by Victor the creature's appearance, insinuating the same homosexual desire within him. During the creation scene, there is the implication that Victor "is reacting to his own sexuality when he is confronting the naked body of his Creature"

(Eberle-Sinatra 194). Immediately after the creature awakens, Victor describes the intentionality in the design and construction of the creature's body: "His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! —Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness..." (Shelley 39). Victor admits to his desire to create a beautiful man with emphasis on the muscles apparent under the skin and the visual appeal of his hair and teeth. The first comment Victor makes about the creature's physicality is the accentuation of his muscles underneath his skin, which matches the visual portrayal of Rocky as muscular and Frank's emphasis on this aspect of Rocky's body. The adjectives 'lustrous', 'flowing' and 'pearly' have positive connotations, demonstrating Victor's approval of the creature's appearance. This description reveals the creature's aesthetic appeal for Victor which then insinuates an attraction to the creature based on appearance similar to Frank-N-Furter's attraction to Rocky's body. As Frank's attraction to Rocky reveals his homosexual desire, Victor's attraction to a male creature reveals his homosexuality in this moment. Both Frank-N-Furter and Victor Frankenstein place importance on the physical beauty during the creation process and notice this beauty within their creatures, illuminating their homosexuality through this attraction to another male figure.

While the homosexuality of both Frank and Victor comes to light through their reaction to their creature's physical appearance, each character reacts differently to this realization based upon the cultural context of the text. In the 1970s, movements towards acceptance of homosexuality and sexuality in general were growing, and the film reflects this acceptance by promoting the homosexual relationship between Frank and Rocky. Homosexuality is celebrated by Frank-N-Furter's marriage and consummation of his relationship with Rocky. Just after they enter the bridal suite, Frank jumps into Rocky's arms as the curtains close and the next scene

displays Rocky contently sleeping in the bed wrapped in a sheet. While it is not explicitly shown, the positioning of characters at the end of one scene and the beginning of the other insinuates that Frank and Rocky had intercourse. Thus, homosexual desires are affirmed by the characters' action on them. Situated in the time when homosexuality was no longer considered a mental disorder and gay rights were growing in visibility, the film acknowledges and supports such social evolution by exhibiting homosexual marriage and intercourse as an acceptable response to same-sex desires.

In contrast, homosexuality was not socially acceptable and would have been considered perverted behavior in the Romantic period, reflected by Victor's rejection of his attraction to the creature immediately after describing its beautiful qualities. In the same sentence depicting the creature's muscles and flowing hair, Victor counteracts this positive description: "...but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set..." (Shelley 39). By identifying how the positive qualities of the creature enhance the negative, Victor repudiates his attraction to the beauty of the creature. MacDonald references a quote from Timothy Morton that succinctly describes the creature as "an object of homophobic fascination" for Victor (MacDonald 54). He refuses to accept any alluring qualities, instead finding a way to negate them, because then he would have to accept his homosexual attraction to the creature. Victor seems to fear his own attraction to the creature, but is still emphatic about the its appearance, demonstrating this homophobic fascination with his creation. Just as the society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century rejected homosexuality as deviant behavior, Victor renounces his own homosexual desire for the creature and attempts to evade it. The positive reaction of Frank to his homosexuality based on the

cultural context of the film helps illuminate the rejection of the same behavior in Victor because of the differences in action and reaction of the two characters.

While the homosexuality of Frank-N-Furter and Victor can be clearly delineated from their attraction to the creature, the distinction of their gender as either male or female is much more muddled. Frank-N-Furter exemplifies the combination of both genders into one person through his appearance and role in the creation of Rocky that designates him as both a male scientist and a mother. Upon first glance, it becomes apparent that Frank is a transvestite, or a man dressing as a woman. He wears a woman's corset, underwear, heels, and a face completely covered in makeup, blurring the line between man and woman from the moment he is introduced in the film. This gender bending continues into the creation scene both visually and symbolically. Frank wears a green apron "tied like a dress around his waist, which gives the dual impression of both a doctor prepared to deliver a child and a mother about to give birth" (Soman 23). Since both wear similar medical gowns in the hospital during delivery, the use of the apron in the scene creates this simultaneity of mother and scientist within Frank. Furthermore, the delivery of Rocky is done scientifically alongside birthing imagery. Frank uses various technological devices to give Rocky life, including a blinding light insinuating a surge of electricity. Yet, Rocky emerges from a pool of liquid head first, similar to a baby emerging from a womb. Similarly, immediately after his creation, Rocky sings, "I've got the feeling someone's going to be cutting the thread" (O'Brien 39). This is directly in reference to a sword hanging over his head, however it evokes the image of cutting the umbilical cord after birth. These visual and aural elements of the scene conjure an image of birth amidst a scientific creation of life. In the birthing imagery, Frank becomes a mother as the creator of Rocky. The androgynous nature of

Frank is clear by his appearance as a transvestite and his role as simultaneously the male scientist or doctor and mother in the creation of Rocky.

Current literature on the gender of Victor Frankenstein is binary in that he is characterized as either a male scientist attempting to take control of the female birthing process or as a mother himself. Michael Eberle-Sinatra interprets Victor's character as a man treading into the woman's territory by attempting to create life without any female influence, analyzing the language in the birthing scene as masturbatory. Many other scholars view Victor as a mother, including Twitchell, Eichler and Mellor that often utilize the birthing imagery throughout the creation scene and the creature's childlike tendencies as the main sources of evidence for this analysis. A limited number of scholars have read Victor as both male and female, or androgynous, as Frank-N-Furter is understood to be. Marjana Mukherjee and Joydeep Banerjee have begun the work of unpacking his character as androgynous, though their analysis dedicates a large portion of the essay to the history of separate gender roles and the androgynous nature of most, if not all, characters in *Frankenstein* with little in depth inquiry into Victor in particular. The differing interpretations of Victor as either man or woman can be combined into an understanding of his characters as a melding of masculinity and femininity, especially in conjunction with our understanding of Frank-N-Furter as androgynous based on appearance and power as scientist and mother.

Just as Frank-N-Furter does in the creation scene, Victor assumes the role of the scientist or doctor and mother, fusing a typically masculine position with a feminine one and creating an androgynous character. Victor's male identification comes from his sex and the scientific elements of the creation. When speaking with Walton, Victor describes his actions as an occupation and compares it with other jobs: "...I appeared rather like one doomed by slavery to

toil in the mines, or any other unwholesome trade, than an artist occupied by his favourite employment” (Shelley 38). The analogy to working in the mines and the diction of ‘trade’ and ‘employment’ directly describe Victor’s action as a job, which would position him as a scientist or doctor in profession. Similarly, in the creation scene, Victor calls his tools “the instruments of life” that “infuse a spark of being” (38) which constructs an image of scientific utensils and a similar electrical force that awakens the creature, similar to the light in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Victor uses language associating his actions with a job or work to identify himself as a scientist creating life outside of the womb. This emphasizes Victor’s masculine power in that he utilizes his intelligence to create life rather than relying on the female body.

Concurrently, Shelley employs birthing imagery around Victor’s work to portray him as a mother. When describing the months leading up to the creation scene, Victor recounts how “winter, spring, and summer, passed away during [his] labours,” (38). The three seasons that pass equate to nine months that Victor has been working on the creature, mimicking the gestation period for women. In the same sentence, the use of ‘labour’ associates Victor’s actions with birth, as the term is often used to describe the process of giving birth. After viewing the creature, Victor laments on the “wretch whom with such infinite pains and care [he] had endeavored to form” (39). The language of this sentence insinuates that Victor experienced childbirth in a sense, as he encounters the same intense pain and care that mothers describe after labour. Through the language in the scene and the lack of specific scientific description of the process, Shelley portrays Victor as a mother during the creation scene. This birthing imagery appears alongside the scientific descriptions of the creation that identify Victor as a scientist, creating a simultaneity of masculinity associated with science and the femininity associated with birth within the scene and Victor himself. In a single moment, Victor appears as both a mother and



scientist, creating androgyny in his character when he takes the on role of both genders. While he may not visibly portray characteristics of both a man and woman as Frank-N-Furter does, Victor demonstrates the same androgyny through his masculine and feminine action in the creation scene.

The understanding of Frank-N-Furter and Frankenstein as mothers complicates many of the sexual relationships in both texts as they become incestuous. In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the most widely recognized incestuous relationships is that between Frank and Rocky that displays the thin line separating familial love from romantic love. Immediately after Rocky is born, Frank shows the qualities of both mother and romantic partner when, “gripped by euphoric anticipation, [he] pursues Rocky throughout the laboratory before scolding him like a child for misbehaving” (Soman 23). Frank then verbally states the incestual components of their relationship when responding to Janet’s quip about Rocky having too many muscles; he quips, “I didn’t make him for you” (O’Brien 45). Frank’s role as mother is displayed by his acknowledgement that he ‘made’ Rocky, or birthed him as discussed earlier in the essay. The romantic aspect of the relationship is demonstrated by Rocky’s creation specifically for Frank. He was not created for Janet or another character but is meant to be Frank’s sexual partner and was born to be just that. This becomes increasingly apparent with the marriage and consummation that occurs in the next scene wherein Frank acts on the sexual desire for his creation. The blurring of the boundary between mother and partner reveals Frank’s incestuous relationship with Rocky. His ability to act on the sexual love he feels for Rocky while also acting as his mother demonstrates the similarities in romantic and familial love as both are able to exist within the same relationship. While the film may not be condoning or encouraging incestuous relationships, it does demonstrate how taboo forms of sexual love are akin to other forms of love

that are deemed more natural, such as that between a mother and child. Alongside the emphatic representation of homosexuality in the film to promote a normalization of previously deviant sexual behaviors, the coexistence of a romantic and familial bond between mother and son works to promote sexual freedom, though not necessarily advocating for incest in reality.

Similar to the rejection of homosexuality in the novel, the representation of incest between Victor and the creature in *Frankenstein* ultimately renounces such behavior by preventing any actual incestuous intercourse to occur. As described above, Frankenstein demonstrates homosexual desires for his creature that become incestuous with the understanding of Victor as the creature's mother. However, unlike Frank-N-Furter and Rocky, Victor and his creature do not act on any sexual desire. Instead, Frankenstein avoids his creature, and thus any homosexual or incestuous relationship with it: "the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the chamber" (Shelley 39). It is after Victor recognizes the homosexuality and incestuous nature of his feelings towards the creature that he feels horrified and disgusted by his own desires. He creates physical distance between himself and the creature, demonstrating a rejection of these desires that contrasts the affirmation of them seen in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Furthermore, Victor's destruction of the heterosexual incestuous relationship between the creature and its potential mate demonstrates the rejection of incestuous relationships in the text and not just of the homosexuality in Victor. When fashioning the creature's female companion, he "looked on [the creature], his countenance expressed the utmost extent of malice and treachery" before destroying the female (Shelley 138). This moment has previously been interpreted as Victor eradication of heterosexuality for the creature; however, it is also a dismantling of another incestuous relationship. The female creature would have shared a mother

with the male creature in Victor, identifying them as siblings. In both scenes, Victor utilizes a pair of intensely negative words, either 'horror and disgust' in the creation scene or 'malice and treachery' in the destruction of the female to describe the desire for an incestuous relationship, condemning such behavior. He then abolishes any possibility of acting on such desires by physically removing either himself or the female creature from the equation. In comparison to the reaction to incest between Frank and Rocky, *Frankenstein* completely renounces incest through Victor's negative reaction to the creature and his erasure of the possibility for incestuous intercourse to occur.

While the incestuous relationship between creator and creature in both texts is the most widely discussed, there is another that occurs between the metaphorical mother figure and the creature in both texts. In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, this relationship forms between Janet and Rocky to promote female sexuality and agency within a socially taboo sexual relationship. After sexual intercourse with Frank, Janet approaches Rocky while he is recovering from Riff's physical abuse. Betten describes how Janet's motherly instincts appear when she "finds Rocky, he is battered, bruised and very rattled... Janet tries to soothe his fears and even rips her own clothing to make bandages for his injuries" (8). She becomes a mother figure for Rocky as she cares for him like a mother would for her child. Within the same moment she acts as a mother, Janet begins to seduce Rocky through the song "Toucha" that confesses her sexual desire for him. Unlike her previous heterosexual intercourse with Frank wherein Janet was a passive participant, she becomes the instigator of and an active participant in this incestuous relationship. As the only female character experiencing increased sexuality, the fact that Janet's agency is gained through a taboo sexual relationship instead of the typical homosexual relationships is incredibly important as it illuminates the constraints placed on female sexuality and the need for

wider acceptance to allow for sexual release. Prior to the 1970s, women's sexuality was restricted to heterosexual marriage. This social restriction on female sexuality is represented by Janet's passivity in the scene with Frank, while her sexual awakening comes with the forbidden incestual encounter with Rocky, showing the lack of agency for women in current sexual structures and the empowering nature of fewer constraints. The film uses incest as the type of taboo sexuality that liberates Janet from the control of social sexual standards.

A similar circumstantial incestuous relationship develops between Elizabeth and the creature after her wedding to Victor; however, female sexuality is negatively represented through the connotations of rape in Elizabeth's violent death. She acts as a mother figure throughout the novel, seen in her literal transformation into Victor's mother in his dream and her constant nurturing and loving nature. Yet, when she marries Victor, the creature's mother or parental figure, Elizabeth becomes another mother to the creature. As the creature's mother, the sexual undertones around her death become incestuous, as it is the creature instigating this act. Victor finds Elizabeth "lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down" (Shelley 165). The positioning of her body on the marital bed alone implies consummation or intercourse which is emphasized by the creature's remark that it "shall be with [Victor] on [his] wedding night" (140). The phrase "being with someone" on the wedding night insinuates having sex with them. This phrase in conjunction with the setting of Elizabeth's murder alludes to it as a sexual act. The violence or rape aspect comes in with her body's arrangement on the bed. She was not laid across the bed, but was 'thrown,' illustrating violence towards her. Furthermore, her 'head hanging down' elicits passivity and limpness often associated with rape victims. As the only moment in the novel that implies intercourse for a woman, this savage action associated with her sexuality reveals its danger and promotes a lack of sexuality for women. Unlike the empowering

aspect of incestuous or taboo sexuality for Janet, a similar relationship between Elizabeth and the creature portrays assault and ends with her death, illustrating the hazards of female sexuality.

Though scholars diverge on their interpretations of gender identification and sexuality in both texts, a vast majority criticize *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* for the return to conventional society at the end of the film. Such scholars interpret Brad and Janet's reentry into society as indicative of the temporary nature of their vivacious sexuality that will ultimately be rejected by stringent cultural norms. The death of Frank-N-Furter and Rocky just prior to their return supports this critique of the film, as the main figures of accepted homosexuality have been murdered. However, this reading of the ending fails to incorporate the tone around the deaths and the restoration of Brad and Janet's typical lifestyle that illuminate the film's commentary on society's view of sexuality in the 1970s.

The ending of the film criticizes the social limitations of sexuality through the devastating death of Frank and Rocky and the visual representation of the castle compared to the surrounding area. Immediately prior to his death, Frank sings the ballad "I'm Going Home" that describes his happiness of traveling back to Transylvania, his home. Despite the criminal and unethical actions of Frank throughout the movie, his sentiment about returning to a place of comfort garners sympathy from the audience inside and outside the film. The placement of this song prior to his death portrays his death as tragic, as his inner desire to be in a world of familiarity and acceptance will never come to fruition. In response to Frank's death, Rocky attempts to save his mother/lover and is killed in the process of showing affection towards Frank. Both of these characters are sympathetic in the moment of their deaths, indicating their death as undesirable. Dr. Scott and Riff Raff, the murderer of Frank and Rocky, believe that "society must be protected" from those like Frank (O'Brien 107). This is a common ideology of those

who opposed the sexual revolution of the 1970s, and the use of this phrase as the reason for their death references the sexual oppression of homosexuals in America to portray Riff Raff as the villain in the scene. Furthermore, as Brad and Janet leave the castle, they enter an area of darkness and destruction while ominous music plays in the background. In comparison to the light, colorful, and upbeat visual and aural features of the castle, the outside world is incredibly bleak. This contrast displays the positivity of a world with increased acceptance of sexuality through the vibrancy of the castle and the detrimental aspects of the society that rejects such sexuality. Within the context of the 1970s, the film is supporting the sexual revolution in which homosexuality and female sexuality are becoming increasingly visible, while critiquing the previous social structures that suppressed sexual expression through the death of Frank and Rocky.

While the ending of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* emphasizes the promotion of sexuality within the context of the sexual revolution, the ending in *Frankenstein* provides commentary on gender roles through Victor's death that alludes to the dangers of growing male power within the birthing process. After finding Victor dead at the hands of the monster, Walton laments his loss and shows anger towards the creature: "when I again cast my eyes on the lifeless form of my friend, indignation was rekindled within me" (Shelley 188). However, he is the sole source of sympathy for Victor. His creation of life and then abandonment of the creature spurs the murder of an extensive number of uninvolved people, including William, Justine, Clerval, and Elizabeth, that often leaves reader apathetic towards his death. Victor also refuses to admit to or amend his mistake, failing to end the perpetual murder of his friends and family by the creature. For these reasons, Victor's death does not seem as regrettable or somber as Frank-N-Furter's was, and to some is retribution for his behavior. Moreover, Victor's demise symbolizes

the return to a separation of gender, as he demonstrated androgyny in his role as man and mother. The death of the androgynous figure restores the split between male and female. The ambivalent or positive reaction to Victor's death and thus the death of androgyny supports the division between genders based on their function in society. Similarly, the catastrophic result of his decision and his ultimate death supports the argument that women should maintain control of childbirth, as Victor's attempts to be a man and mother culminated in excessive bloodshed. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century when men were attempting to control childbirth as doctors, Victor's failure as a child bearer and his death demonstrate the importance of both genders in their different functions and promotes female authority within the birthing domain.

Despite the many differences between *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Frankenstein*, the two texts share similar portrayals of gender roles and deviant sexuality through characterization and character relationships. However, the overall mood or tone surrounding these ideas transitions from rejection in the novel to celebration in the film. While the film adaptation is a variant of the original story and many analyze it in terms of its evolution from Mary Shelley's 19<sup>th</sup> century text, it can be a useful tool in revealing the adverse depiction of atypical sexual relationships in the novel through a comparison to the acceptance of such relationships in the film. Even though the terms to describe homosexuality or androgyny are more recent, these concepts have existed for centuries, and thus it is important to look at their changing representation alongside the evolution of their cultural perception.

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