

ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

ESSAY

On mothers, monsters and myths: A look at the Mary before the Mary

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In a wilting summer swelter of 1797 in London, a name was born twice—mother Mary Wollstonecraft wound the clock of daughter Mary Wollstonecraft (Godwin's) life, for the very first time.

At that moment, both Marys stood at the brink of their lives—one with a foot in the grave, the other crawling toward a future of myth, invention, and literary resurrection. The daughter writhing into the world would soon go on to become the Mary we all know and love, the Mary Shelley who authored the undying monster of *Frankenstein* (1818).

Unfortunately, Wollstonecraft does not survive to influence the little girl alive, but undoubtedly slithers her way through to her as a haunting ghost of social and literary legacy, which nurtures Mary Godwin into her creative flowering. Although seldom a topic at the table, the mother behind the monster is pivotal to igniting the flare in the teenage genius, setting the ravishing responses against hypocritical politics, the Gothic ardour with which she lived, and the unconventionality that became Shelley's blueprint.

For the sake of clarity, the essay will be viewing the mother as Wollstonecraft, through the lens of the daughter, Shelley, to fully dissect the often overlooked pillars she left behind as parent, philosopher, and the proto mother of feminism.

Wollstonecraft's bequest bears several pieces of work strewn throughout her life revolving around society, its schemes, and the inequality that governed the crises of the time. As an early supporter of the French Revolution, her earliest critically acclaimed work was a clapback at British statesman and political theorist Edmund Burke, who wrote a political pamphlet defending the monarchy and empathising Antoinette in what Mary characterises as “unnecessarily gendered language” that only achieves a sexist undertone and supports “tradition for the sake of tradition.” In her curt feminist rebuttal titled *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), Wollstonecraft criticises the bias for passivity in women, the theatrical tableau that is reserved for only the “sublime and beautiful” queen and not the starving housewives driven to the streets because they lacked the means to feed their families.

Unfortunately though, despite its pinch-hitting take that caused it to sell out in just three weeks, the year of 1790 was not particularly attributed to the acceptance of female writers, and the piece was soon thrown down. It was only until the late 20th century when sustained critical study was carried out by feminist scholars like Claudia Johnson who praised it to be “unparalleled in its argumentative force”.

However, the preeminence of her moral compass is illustrated best in her most incandescent work, the 1792 essay “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”, in which Wollstonecraft abandons the ornamental niceties expected of female writers and instead performs a kind of ideological vivisection on the culture that manufactures feminine weakness. Far from depicting women as innately fragile, she insists they are made so “rendered weak and wretched” by an education designed to stunt them into “spaniel-like affection” rather

than moral independence. This argument is not merely moral but anatomical: she dissects how society engineers its own monsters by denying women the rational training that forms virtue, which is a mesial structure, creating what she calls “artificial, weak characters”—creatures built for pleasing rather than thinking.

She went on to demolish Rousseau's ‘Sophy’, making the critique especially telling. Rousseau's ideal woman was a deliberately dependent, docile creature trained to exist only for men's comfort and to reflect male virtue rather than possess any of her own. Wollstonecraft called his pedagogical fantasies “absurd sophisms,” exposing how his notions were nothing more than a carefully curated dependency for the loophole for means of control over them. Reading it now, the text feels like an early autopsy of social monstrosity, an almost Gothic recognition that grotesques are not born but assembled, piece by piece, by the environments that betray them.

Jane Austen's sly rebellions and observations of society, Eliot's ethical gravity, Woolf's reclamation of Wollstonecraft as “alive and active”—all attest to the force of a mind that refused conventionality. And while posterity has been quick to credit Godwin or the influential men around Mary Shelley for shaping a literary prodigy, the deeper inheritance lies elsewhere, specifically in the mother whose writings Mary devoured before she ever wrote a word of her own.

This very conceptual phantom almost glides into her (Wollstonecraft's) daughter's imagination. Shelley's creature, abandoned and misshapen, isolated from community, is not far from the ideology, turning it into the living (or undead) proof of Wollstonecraft's thesis that society, not nature, is the true manufacturer of monsters.

The work provides a faint galvanising pulse that Shelley would later amplify in ways uniquely her own.

Mary grew up in Godwin's radical household, a place where she received an unlikely education for a girl of her time. This home, curtained by the absence of the mother Godwin openly revered as the most extraordinary woman of the age, led Mary to learn of her mother first as myth, then as a political and emotional inheritance. Even her relationships echoed that lineage, notably her relationship with Gilbert Imlay with whom she had Fanny Imlay, Mary's half-sister.

Her carefree romances, and sentiments published in the *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796) must have

deeply shaped the emotional codes in Shelley. Wollstonecraft's turbulent past; the charged, unconventional environment that taught Mary to feel, see and think, is displayed animatedly in her relationship with the married Percy Shelley, who she, ironically, is rumoured to have met at her mother's grave. In an elaborate way, her mother's grave played Cupid, tying her strings to the person whose early encouragement and editorial involvement in *Frankenstein* ushered her towards an unleashed potential.

Shelley's imaginative framework, then, emerges as both an extension and a divergence from Wollstonecraft's legacy. Growing up without her mother's presence nurtured no stabilising maternal reference, a condition that shaped Mary's earliest understanding of selfhood and emotional precariousness. This absence forms a clear parallel to the Creature's first consciousness in *Frankenstein*—being confronted with existence but denied guidance, left to interpret the world without protection or instruction. Where Wollstonecraft had identified the social mechanisms that create the cultivation of weakness for the sake of compliance, Shelley internalises that insight and transforms its scale. Her mother's moral horror, rooted in systems that deform individuals through inequality, allowed Shelley to illuminate an acute view concerned with what happens when the one who holds power simply withdraws and care is withheld at the very moment it is most needed.

While Wollstonecraft believed that rational improvement could correct injustice, Shelley's narrative offers a more austere verdict, that the damage produced by abandonment can become irreversible. It is here, in this difference between reformist optimism and lived disillusionment, that Mary Shelley's own experiences most clearly refract her mother's theories into a darker, more unforgiving moral landscape.

Predominantly, Wollstonecraft's legacy moved through the world in spite of attempts to bury it. After Godwin's memoir exposed the full, unvarnished contours of her life with all aspects of her loves, failures, and defiance, she was met with a near-instant revilement that pushed her name into a cultural hush. Yet, even in that imposed silence, her ideas persisted.

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Strip away the scandals, the miscrediting, and the original current that set the course for Mary Shelley's success is unmistakable—it is in the womb of Wollstonecraft—the legacy before the legend, the mother in the margins, the forgotten Mary before the one celebrated.

Mrinmoyi is a cat enthusiast who likes her pottery by feminist icons and her poetry in fickle feathers. To learn an absurd amount of gossip on Godwin's group, contact her @uzma31989@gmail.com.

LITERATURE

POETRY

SELECTED POEMS

AMRITA NANDINI

The Little Boy

He sold magic
mostly for free,
wrapped in candy wrappers,
joy and spring-coloured rosettes,
and, at times, priced at
a few tufts of dandelion threads.
His eyes—ablaze and fiery,
too bright for one to see
the sigh resting on his eyelids,
a secret he claimed as his truth,
shared only with the midnight moon,
or silenced in layers
of his incantations.
But the silly boy didn't know,
his truth was not his secret
but his soul,
lighted by a thousand suns,
as free as the dawn-bright sky,
where a thousand dandelion threads
could leap to reincarnate
and grow.



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

Pariah

She grew like a weed
in the rose thicket
of the moonlit hill,
and so was weeded
by the polar wind.
But—
like the stubbornness of lint
clinging to its being,
like the deciduous hopes
of the refugees,
like the rhythm
in a flurry of broken leaves,
she roots again
to claim her place
in the history
of unsung
melodies.

Hope

The leaf-dead promises
hold fast to the frays of my jeans.
Perhaps they are not dead;
perhaps they are just sleeping,
dreaming,
waiting for spring...

Amrita Nandini's interest in poetry began early and has remained a constant alongside her 16-year career in marketing and communications across Bangladesh and abroad. She writes primarily in Bangla, with work published in literary outlets such as Kali O Kalam and more. Now based in Hong Kong, she is taking a break to focus on writing, reading, and travel, and hopes to dedicate herself to writing full-time. She also has a keen interest in music and theatre.

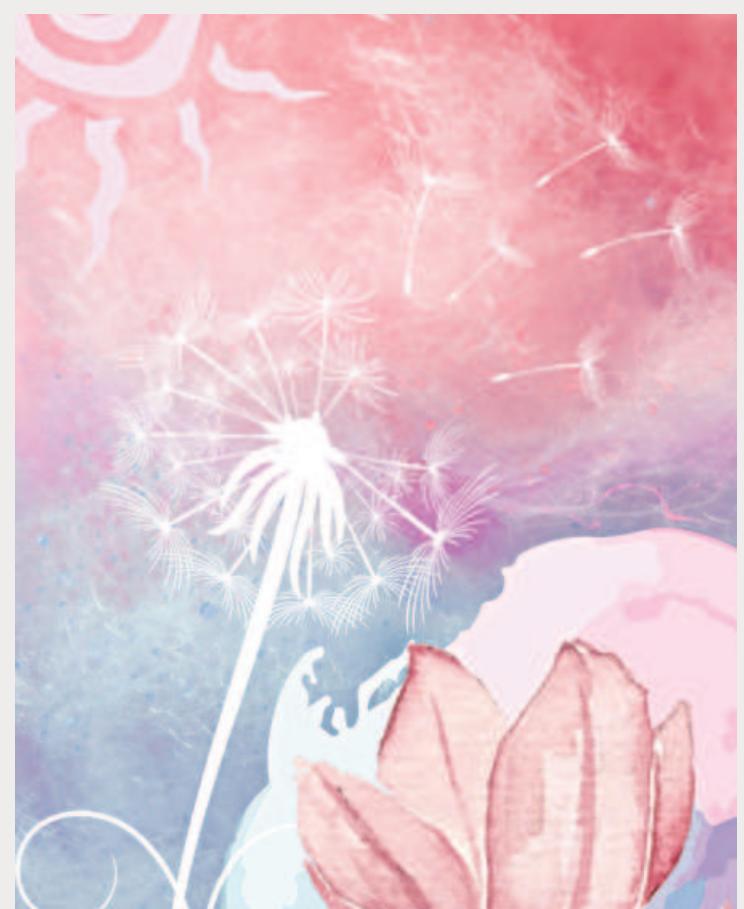


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