

In Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein*, written in 1816 as a tale of horror, LGBTQIA+ readers find familiar descriptions of social transition, secrets, guilt, shame, anxiety and depression. We nod knowingly as Victor Frankenstein describes living with a depression whose origin lies in his secrets and their consequences. Victor's eventual placement under suicide watch¹ and self-medication with opiates² mirror many of our experiences as we attempt to numb ourselves to our realities. Victor shuns The Monster, despite being his creator (or parent), a familiar experience for many LGBTQIA+ people whose families won't accept them. The Monster is a kindred spirit whose desire for acceptance and companionship is met with fear or violence. In fact, The Monster's efforts to join the De Lacey cottagers closely resembles the social transition process for many LGBTQIA+ readers, and I will examine those efforts as they mirrored my own.

After being violently expelled from a nearby village The Monster finds refuge in a hovel adjacent to the home of a family of French exiles: De Lacey, his son Felix, daughter Agatha, and eventually Felix's wife, Safie. The Monster spends several months observing this family's kindness, dignity and joy, despite their exile and poverty. "*The gentle manners and beauty of the cottagers greatly endeared them to me...if any others happened to enter the cottage, their harsh manners and rude gait only enhanced to me the superior accomplishments of my friends.*"³ The Monster craves companionship from the cottagers, but fears revealing himself to them. Despite the cottagers' virtues, the ostracization and violence he faced at the hands of others drives him to remain hidden, much like LGBTQIA+ people might hide their true selves from the people they love. Even in 2022, despite noticeable progress over the last couple decades, being open about

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1994 ed. (Gramercy Books), 209

² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 211

³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 122

sexuality or gender is not always practical⁴ because of societal pressure. As The Monster says to De Lacey:

*“They are kind - they are the most excellent creatures in the world; but, unfortunately, they are prejudiced against me. I have good dispositions; my life has been hitherto harmless, and in some degree beneficial; but a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster.”*⁵

Beginning transition, my first thoughts were about my friends, family and coworkers. In *Frankenstein* The Monster recalled: *“I...dared to fancy amiable and lovely creatures sympathizing with my feelings, and cheering my gloom; their angelic countenances breathed smiles of consolation.”*⁶ and that *“...my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures...”*⁷ I quickly learned I couldn’t overlook that I’d withheld, or as some viewed it, lied about something significant for a long time so care had to be taken in how I revealed myself to the people important to me. I planned out each encounter to ensure the greatest degree of success in maintaining these relationships. In support groups, “How do I tell so-and-so?” is a common question that I asked myself when I first began. The Monster also carefully orchestrated his initial encounter with the cottagers:

⁴ Nico Lang, ‘2022 Was the Worst Year Ever for Anti-Trans Bills. How Did We Get Here?’, *Them*, 2022, <https://www.them.us/story/2022-anti-trans-bills-history-explained> (accessed January 29, 2023)

⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 149

⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 146

⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 146-147

*“I revolved many projects; but that on which I finally fixed was, to enter the dwelling when the blind old man should be alone... if, in the absence of his children, I could gain the good-will and mediation of the old De Lacey, I might, by his means, be tolerated by my younger protectors.”*⁸

Just as an LGBTQIA+ individual might spend significant amounts of time considering their message and its thoughtfulness, The Monster would also consider his ability to deliver his message: *“I ought not to make the attempt until I had first become a master of their language; which knowledge might enable me to make them overlook the deformity of my figure...”*⁹

Because of the gravity of what he was attempting, The Monster postpones his encounter for more time to develop and display good judgment and a shrewd mind, saying:

*“I postponed this attempt for some months longer; for the importance attached to its success inspired me with a dread lest I should fail. Besides, I found that my understanding improved so much with every day’s experience that I was unwilling to commence this undertaking until a few more months should have added to my sagacity.”*¹⁰

I delayed the encounter with my parents and brother for five months while refining my message and planning how and when it would happen. Social transition at work didn’t happen until I had been otherwise “out” nearly a year and a half, and the process took just over two months from the initial conversations to the actual announcement. Even my children required

⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 147

⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 124

¹⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 145

nearly two months of preparation before I felt ready to speak with them. While my experiences aren't universal, they are similar to those of other LGBTQIA+ individuals I've met.

I've developed a significant inferiority complex from the stigmas society has laid on people of transgender experience in particular, a sense of being "broken" or "damaged", a common feeling in the transgender community. We see the seemingly "normal" people around us as gatekeepers to a society that was not built for us. Many of us feel that with careful planning we can show people how reasonable, rational and heartfelt we are, and convince them that we belong. The Monster reflects:

*"I looked upon them as superior beings, who would be the arbiters of my future destiny. I formed in my imagination a thousand pictures of presenting myself to them, and their reception of me. I imagined they would be disgusted, until, by my gentle demeanour and conciliating words, I should first win their favour, and afterwards their love."*¹¹

What happens if we lose the support of our families or friends? What happens if our workplace is hostile? It takes an enormous amount of willpower to quell these fears and proceed, potentially shaking the foundations of our lives. The Monster recalls that *"I endeavored to crush these fears, and to fortify myself for the trial which in a few months I resolved to undergo..."*¹²

We, and The Monster, cling to the words of De Lacey: *"Do not despair. To be friendless is indeed to be unfortunate; but the hearts of men, when unprejudiced by any obvious self-interest, are full of brotherly love and charity. Rely, therefore, on your hopes; and if these friends are good and amiable, do not despair."*¹³

¹¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 125

¹² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 146

¹³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 149

Social transition is an incredibly stressful experience, as The Monster describes: “*My heart beat quick; this was the hour and moment of trial which would decide my hopes or realise my fears.*”¹⁴ I recall sitting at the kitchen table of my parents’ house. I’d waited several hours, patiently, for the right moment to tell the tale. I feared a poor reception and a need to flee the house. I can’t describe the experience any better than The Monster: “*This, I thought, was the moment of decision, which was to rob me of, or bestow happiness on me for ever. I struggled vainly for firmness sufficient to answer him, but the effort destroyed all my remaining strength; I sank on the chair, and sobbed aloud.*”¹⁵

I am fortunate; I’ve lost relatively little in my transition. Some of my relationships have changed, but few are gone. Being “out” at work has even shed light on some practices that were unintentionally discriminatory, just out of habit and thoughtlessness, that have been improved since. But my story is not typical. Encounters similar to the one between The Monster and the De Lacey cottagers are far more common than mine. Views of what gender or sexuality can be are immutable facts to some people, and much of the world around us is built to accommodate a specific idea of how they work. Some people will insist there is no conversation to be had, no questions worth asking, nothing to consider and will sometimes react with fear or anger. This is the significance of The Monster’s story in *Frankenstein* to LGBTQIA+ readers: The Monster shares our journey; our hidden natures, our hopes, our fears, our preparations, and ultimately our all-too-common failure to receive compassion from those we love or society at large.

In a moment of panic The Monster cries out to De Lacey: “*You and your family are the friends whom I seek. Do not desert me in the hour of trial!*”¹⁶ De Lacey shouts in surprise just as the rest of the family enters. Seeing The Monster clinging to the old man’s knees, Agatha faints,

¹⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 148

¹⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 150

¹⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 150

Safie flees, and Felix tears The Monster away and beats him with a stick. There was no moment of consideration, no questions asked, no attempts to comprehend the scene, only misunderstanding, fear and violence. The De Laceys left the cottage, never to return. The Monster burns the cottage to the ground and vows to seek out Victor Frankenstein: “...and from you I determined to seek that justice which I vainly attempted to gain from any other being that wore the human form.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 156