My Gothic dissertation: a podcast

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MY GOTHIC DISSERTATION: A PODCAST

by

Anna Williams

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2019

Thesis Supervisors: Professor Jeff Porter Professor Judith Pascoe
For Suzie
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In *My Gothic Dissertation*, I perform an intertextual analysis of Gothic fiction and modern-day graduate education in the humanities. First, looking particularly at the Female Gothic, I argue that the genre contains overlooked educational themes. I read the student-teacher relationships in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818, 1831), and Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) as critiques of the insidious relationship between knowledge and power. Part literary critic and part literary journalist, I weave through these readings reports of real-life ‘horror stories’ of graduate school, arguing that the power imbalance between Ph.D. advisors and their students can be unexpectedly ‘Gothic’ as well. Drawing on research from the science of learning—developmental psychology, sociology, and pedagogical theory—I advocate for more a student-centered pedagogy in humanities Ph.D. training.

Following in the footsteps of A.D. Carson and Nick Sousanis, I have produced *My Gothic Dissertation* in a nontraditional format—the podcast. Mixing voice, music, and sound, I dramatize scenes from the novels and incorporate analysis through my narration. The real-life “Grad School Gothic” stories are drawn from personal interviews. Much of the science of learning is drawn from personal interviews with researchers as well, though some material comes from recorded presentations that have been posted to public, online venues such as YouTube. The creative/journalistic style of reporting is heavily influenced by programs such as *This American Life, Invisibilia*, and *Serial*, with the dual aims of engaging a broad audience and expanding our modes of scholarly communication beyond the page.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

In *My Gothic Dissertation*, I examine two seemingly unrelated subjects side by side: Gothic fiction of the late 18th/19th century and modern-day graduate education in the humanities. I argue they have more in common than one might think, and graduate education needs to be re-envisioned to eliminate its more “Gothic” elements.

Most critics agree that the Gothic novel developed, in part, as a means for authors to critique feudal aristocracy and the Catholic church—two major societal institutions whose power was under scrutiny in the newly modernized, post-Enlightenment world. I argue that *education* is another power structure being critiqued in the Gothic—particularly in the Female Gothic sub-genre associated with Ann Radcliffe and her imitators. I argue that these novels incorporate elements of the popular *bildungsroman* genre, depicting heroines’ educational journeys and highlighting the insidious relationship between knowledge and power through the machinations of the seemingly omnipotent Gothic villain.

Here I connect the Gothic to graduate training in the humanities, arguing that Ph.D. advisors hold immense power over their students’ success during and after graduate school. Because that power is widely unrecognized, it can be abused, making graduate training feel ‘Gothic’ to those who pursue it. Drawing on the science of learning—developmental psychology, sociology, and pedagogical theory—I advocate for more student-centered graduate training that allows for more creativity and innovation in the next generation of scholarship. I suggest such practices will not only benefit individual students, but also the institutional and cultural wellbeing of the academic humanities overall.
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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

My *Gothic Dissertation* was produced for the ear and is designed to be heard rather than read.

Samples are available on the author’s website (https://www.annawilliamsweb.com/my-gothic-dissertation.html), as well as through ProQuest and the University of Iowa’s Institutional Repository (https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/).
It’s May 4th, 2017, and I’m in Room 311 of the English-Philosophy Building.

Room 311 is a windowless closet crowded with a conference table and a set of rolling chairs that currently contain the members of my dissertation committee – a Radio Scholar, a Romanticist, an 18th-Century-ist, Education Theorist, and Victorianist.

Radio Scholar: So, we’re here to talk about your prospectus and I welcome my delightful colleagues, and we’re interested in raising constructive questions that will help you with clarifying the focus, the scope, and the process – because the process is so interesting.

It’s the job of these five people to “advise” me over the next months or more likely years as I write my dissertation, which is the only thing standing between me and my doctorate in English. What we’re here to discuss today isn’t my dissertation per se but rather my Prospectus – a Microsoft Word document spanning anywhere from 6 to 20 pages that describes the dissertation… the one I haven’t written yet. In this way, think of the Prospectus is a sort of dissertation permission slip – a sheet of paper that, once signed, allows me to climb on board the bus and head into the field of academic literary criticism. And if I don’t get their signatures at the end of this meeting, then I guess I’m going to have to stay behind and eat my bagged lunch all by myself.

It’s expected that a grad student will take anywhere from three to six months to write a Prospectus after passing the Comprehensive Exam. I passed mine in March of 2016 – if hobbling out alive can be called passing – so when I still hadn’t managed to scrape together a Prospectus by that December, things weren’t looking good for me. It was a time of floundering false starts, avoiding run-ins with advisors who I imagined either pitied or despised me for my helplessness, and coming up with ever more elaborate, jargon-ridden descriptions of my project to mask the
fact that it didn’t exist and maybe never would. Whenever anyone would ask me what my
dissertation was about, I’d answer something like, “It’s a rumination on the complexities of the
dialectic between elitism and knowledge in epistemic cultures, and how that dialectic has shaped
modern notions of viability in academic work.” It was, in short, a time of total bullshit.

All of this baggage I carried with me into the windowless closet, and so it seemed
especially alarming when the meeting started out like this:

**Romanticist:** I don’t know how you guys usually do it, but we usually do it with like a
few minutes to talk among ourselves with just the…

**Radio Scholar:** We don’t do that, but we can do that.

**Romanticist:** Why don’t we do that, okay? So, just for a few minutes and then I’ll come
and get you.

In case you missed it, just after the meeting began, I was asked to leave the meeting. I smiled and
nodded out of the room, making sure to grab my notebook so I could jot down a few thoughts for
posterity: “Well fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

The term “Prospectus” dates back to the 18th century, and while the Oxford English
Dictionary says it’s technically “a document setting out the details of a suggested enterprise or
forthcoming publication,” it also has resonances of the wild frontier of mining for precious
metals. Think of the familiar “Old Prospector” character – some gray-haired old man whistler
recklessly devoted to the mad gamble of a gold rush… an enterprise situated somewhere between
the American dream and a delusional treasure hunt. He’s wizened from years of hard labor, has
likely developed a drinking problem, and is so full of tall tales and baffling knowledge that it’s
hard for him to relate to anyone other than his fellow prospectors. Isn’t this exactly what I’ve
become?
If to “prospect” is to survey a place in search of something valuable – to make sense of terrain that can be as wild and expansive as the American West – then in the case of the grad student, “prospecting” means convincing the five people sitting around the conference table that you’ve staked out a corner of the vast landscape of literature and literary criticism that, with your trusty, well-worn tools of synthesis and analysis, you can tame into some kind of order. You can uncover something entirely new and valuable that, at the moment, no one else can see. You can pull gold out of a mountain of rock... but only if they’ll let you try.

So here I am, an Old Prospector in a cardigan and sensible heels, waiting in the hallway while my committee deliberates. Besides cursing into my notebook, I also spend some time – what else? – speculating. Specifically, about what they may be saying in there about me. And unlike the usual grad student for whom this will remain a mystery for life, I now know exactly what they said in my absence. Because – with their permission of course – the tape was rolling the whole time in Room 311. The sacred rites of the Prospectus meeting were being recorded, for maybe the first time in history. In the recording, I can hear myself leave, and then a few seconds later, these words of support from the Romanticist:

Romanticist: I’m just imagining the response, and I’m trying to get us to, like – so I can imagine – this is a complicated thing because it’s a new format. I’m super excited about the new format.

Oh yeah – that’s the other thing. As if writing a dissertation wasn’t hard enough, I’m making it even tougher on myself by trying this new format. But more on that later.

Romanticist: I can imagine – and I think – I have confidence in her, so I have a lot of confidence in this. I can imagine reservations people might have about this. She’s sort of come to this meeting quickly, partly because [voice fades].

I can imagine their reservations, too, because some of them weren’t shy about telling me in the weeks leading up to the meeting.
After going down countless dead ends and abandoning numerous topics, I sensed I was losing any glimmer of credibility I still clung to after Comps, so around March I finally landed on something and really forced myself to forge ahead on it. Victorian amateurism. As in, the growing culture of people in Victorian England who were devoted to some non-academic, non-professional pursuit of knowledge, like the Society of Antiquarians or the troupe of amateur archaeologists roaming the globe with their shovels and pickaxes…

I wanted to say that we had something to learn from those amateurs – those lovers of something – which is a term, by the way, that came into the English lexicon right around the start of the 19th century… which was exactly the period I wanted to study, so that seemed significant. Unlike me, facing down the hyper-professionalized world of literary scholarship with all of this debilitating anxiety, for these amateurs, I wanted to argue, knowledge production was pleasurable. Something done without fear and free from institutional constraints.

And while there may be some benefits to the regulatory system that included meetings like this one, at the same time, I wanted to say, we losing sight of what makes literature matter in the first place. For the amateurs, the perception of what knowledge was was something less rigid… it didn’t need to fit into a tiny box of academic specialization, didn’t depend on approval from others to even get off the ground, didn’t need to follow arcane rules created by the demands of a highly exclusive job market. In short, what we needed to learn from amateurs was how to undo the system that culminated in the writing of a dissertation… you know, that thing I was asking permission to do. It didn’t go over too well. Here are the Victorianist and the 18th-Century-ist:

**Victorianist:** I have complicated views, but basically she’s changed her mind lots of times. So, whatever happens a year from now will be different than this.

It’s only been five months and she’s exact right. But still…. That one was hard to hear.
18th-Century-ist: I’ve already gone through all of my fierce objections with her, and she’s resisted them. So I’m on board with supporting this, but…

Victorianist: Oh me, too. It happened with everybody.

“Fierce objections.” “She’s resisted them.” “It happened with everybody.” Herein lies the double-edged sword that’s constantly pressing against me as I’ve been trying to write this dissertation. What this project is supposedly designed to do is to make me an independent scholar – an expert in my field, deserving of the title “Doctor.” But the way I have to complete this project in self-reliance and independence is by being dependent on my committee for approval at every step, which is… not so self-reliant at all, actually. Four minutes later, I’m back in the room.

Radio Scholar: So, the first question is sort of a really traditional dissertation question – that is, can you tell us a little bit about what’s unique in your reading of these nineteenth-century novels that you’re talking about.

Anna: Yeah. Um, well I think first my reading of Frankenstein is pretty original. I don’t think, to my knowledge, anyone has… [voice fades to background]

“My reading of Frankenstein is pretty original.” I mean, I think it is, but that’s also what I absolutely have to say at this moment. Because that’s what literary scholars do, right? Come up with “readings” that are “original”? I go through each of my other four planned dissertation chapters and explain how those are “original” too.

But even still there was this kind of glitch happening in my brain, where I wanted to do more than just offer “new readings” of literary texts – I wanted to use those readings of literary texts to say something larger, more meaningful about Victorian culture – or really, about our culture. This wasn’t working for the 18th-century-ist.
**18th-Century-ist:** Can I pan out a little bit? I’m less concerned about the individual readings of the novels. I’m more concerned about the larger method, and you and I have bandied this about a lot.

Here we go.

**18th-Century-ist:** So, on the one hand it seems you’re trying to write a piece of social history, and on the other you’re trying to read select literary works.

**Anna:** Mm-hmm.

**18th-Century-ist:** And it becomes very unclear, and still is, I think, as you move through – which is in service of the other.

**Anna:** Okay.

Basically, he’s saying that I seem to be confused about the uses of literature – what reading it can and can’t do. That glitch I was talking about.

**18th-Century-ist:** So, if what you’re aiming to do is to write a piece of literary and cultural history, close-reading a few select novels isn’t really the method to do so. At least, within a traditional dissertation. […] As a traditional dissertation prospectus, this has a lot of problems. [echo]

Yikes.

He was right. At this point, one of the major reasons I wasn’t bouncing along with my peers on the bus to academic professionalism is that I had started asking myself these questions like, “What is the point of a Ph.D. in English?” “What does it mean to be an ‘expert’ in Victorian literature, and is it really even possible to be one?” Maybe most scary of all is that I started to wonder, like one of my own embittered Gen Ed Lit students, why we even read literature at all.

I sought help. I went around asking all of my professors this question that had started to nip at the back of my mind: “What is the purpose of literary criticism?”

The closest I got to the truth – or maybe, the closest I got to a genuine, candid answer – came from a professor who, over the years, had expressed her own frustrations with the
academic system and its various oppressions. Her answer? “No one can tell you because no one fucking knows.” It was like hearing someone else acknowledge that yes, in fact, the emperor was prancing around with no clothes.

Despite my existential doubts and my awkward, fumbling answers, I made it through the meeting. I passed. But it wasn’t easy, and there were more moments like this one:

18th-Century-ist: […] you are not [laughs] developing here a suitable framework for suggesting that the text is making an argument – texts don’t argue; authors argue – that even the author is arguing one thing or another. What you are suggesting… [voice fades to the background]

In my permission slip, I had written a sentence that began with “The text argues.” As in, within the culture of industrial, mid-Victorian Manchester, Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel North and South – or, the “text” – was making a certain argument about knowledge in the aristocracy versus the working classes. The 18th-Century-ist and Romanticist were all over me about it.

Romanticist: I also did not like “the text argues,” and I don’t like the [inaudible] prose style, because I don’t like when inanimate things are made to be agents, and I just think it’s like even when you’re doing a more conventional whatever it’s just hedging, and usually it’s not accurate in some way.

Besides being fodder for my raging Imposter Syndrome, all of this certainty that there was a wrong way to talk about literature and that I was doing it made me think that maybe prospecting is actually more akin to some other aspect of the past. Rather than harkening back to the American Gold Rush, maybe the Prospectus is a relic of the European Enlightenment… a movement that considered knowledge to be absolutely certain only if the seeker followed this very specific set of rules in attaining it – the scientific process. Maybe the dissertation – the goal of this whole ordeal – is, after all, a genre not really suited to the humanities so much as the sciences, and that’s why I’m having so much trouble understanding the rigidity and the fiercely defended conventions surrounding it…

7
It’s as if I’ve been lured into a mind maze… or, like the heroines of the literary genre that developed contemporaneously with the Enlightenment – the Gothic novel – maybe I’ve been lured into a crumbling ancient castle. What got me in here is the prospect of a life devoted to literature – of “professing” it as my career – but, once I arrived, it began promptly to fade from view like the Gothic ghost it is. And now I’m trapped here in this Gothic castle known as grad school, with its intricate system of locked passageways, trap doors, and dead ends, all lorded over by the mysterious cult of the profession. The only way out for me, the intrepid heroine trembling with trepidation, is to figure out the secrets of the ancient cult – to gain some knowledge that, for the next five hundred pages or so – will continue to evade my grasp.

I’ve got to show my mastery of the rules of literary criticism, but at the same time critique them. I’ve got to outsmart the baroque villain of the Grad School Gothic – the dissertation itself – by doing it while also simultaneously un-doing it. And, like those breast-heaving readers enraptured by the illicit world of the Gothic in the 18th and 19th centuries, you’re invited to witness my own daring Ph.D. adventure. Because this is My Gothic Dissertation.
INTRODUCTION: Grad School Gothic

If this was a normal dissertation on Gothic fiction, I’d start with a witty, compelling hook to draw you in—probably some bold or surprising statement about the Gothic or a person associated with it. The hook would lead to an interesting anecdote I’d uncovered in my research… something about the quirky antiquarianism of Horace Walpole, maybe, or how Ann Radcliffe was thought by all of Victorian England to be a reclusive mad woman. You would be charmed by this new knowledge—a vivid image in your brain that illustrated the historical time and place I wanted to transport you to. But then, once I had you, my voice would suddenly become less conversational, more authoritative, and you’d find yourself buried alive in a formidable scholarly paragraph. It would almost certainly include some statement about the origins of “the Gothic,” like this one from David Punter:

**Punter:** The origins of Gothic are very difficult to, to pin down. Uh, it is conventionally said that Gothic really begins, or Gothic fiction really begins, with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* in the 1760’s. And that was indeed the first of the Gothic novels, very rapidly succeeded by the famous Gothic novels by Ann Radcliffe, principally *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*, and Matthew Lewis’s much more salacious and perhaps challenging novel *The Monk*, all published in the 1780’s and 1790’s. So, that is the heyday of Gothic fiction […] But, rather like the subjects of Gothic fiction who continually seem to have an afterlife, who refuse to lie down and be buried, then Gothic fiction keeps cropping up again throughout the nineteenth century.

I would tell you that, since the publication of his book *The Literature of Terror* in 1980, Punter has widely been credited with exhuming the Gothic from the critical crypt where literary giants like William Wordsworth wished it would “lie down and be buried.” I would say that critics have historically maligned the Gothic for being too over-the-top,¹ too provocative of base emotions,²

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¹ In his “Preface” to the 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* – now widely considered to be the manifesto for early Romanticism – Wordsworth implicitly contrasts his new brand of poetry with the Gothic, claiming that “the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants” (99).
too black and white in its portrayals of good vs. evil.\(^3\) (Those dings, by the way, indicate the presence of footnotes… citations or extra commentary that can be found by the more scholarly inclined on the podcast website.)

In a normal introduction to a normal Gothic dissertation, here I would position myself among the more generous critics such as Punter and say that there’s actually some pretty nuanced social commentary going on in this body of literature, and that that the novels’ typical settings—foreboding medieval castles or spooky monasteries—speak volumes about the targets of their criticism.

**Punter:** Castles being a residue of a feudal or aristocratic past, and monasteries or convents representing in some way Catholic religion and some kind of opposition to what seemed in British culture as the comparative clarity of the Protestant religion […] The persistence of a past which we’d wished in our desire for modernity to be long-since dead. But that power seems to go on.\(^4\)

Once held rigidly in place by the unquestioning obedience of the lower orders, these societal institutions and their corresponding edifices are symbolically falling apart in Gothic texts as new, more democratic ideas threaten to topple their authority. When the heroine becomes trapped in one of these crumbling castles or convents, we see the worst of that institution—its corruption, its desperate attempts to cling to power at any cost—made evident in the psychological terrors she is subjected to while trapped inside.

**Punter:** Because what they turn out to be, once you are inside them, is labyrinths. It is impossible to find one’s way around them. There is always darkness, there is always the threat of falling through a trap door or finding one’s self in a lower level… These are scenarios, unlike the conventional house, in which there are no real maps. You can never tell exactly how to get out…

\(^3\) See, for instance, Leslie Fiedler’s chapter on the Gothic in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960).

\(^4\) Chris Baldick (1992) and Jerrold Hogle (2002) also promote Punter’s interpretation of the Gothic as a genre concerned with the machinations of a societal institution losing grasp of its cultural authority.
In other words, the place in which the heroine finds herself trapped also looks very much like an externalization of her own mind under the influence of the institution’s manipulation—confused, perilous, and darkened with self-doubt.

In a normal Gothic dissertation, this is where I would make some astute observation about the genre’s social commentary and then state my intervention—something like, “For decades now, scholars have studied the Gothic in its original context—the late 18th and early 19th century—but I argue that the genre a useful tool for illuminating problematic power moves made by outmoded institutions in any context.” I would define the scope of my dissertation by stating that I plan to examine one modern institution in particular that many consider to be losing cultural power—the academic humanities—and then lend authority to that claim by bringing in the voices of noted commentators like former MLA president Sidonie Smith:

**Smith:** In these times, everything seems to be lined up against the humanities. Our enrollments are shrinking, as are our majors. Our funding is decreasing as a result of corporatized assessment and value settling. Our mode of scholarly communication is in unsettling transition. Our fields are becoming feminized with a large proportion of contingent faculty. The humanities threatens to become, as last year’s MLA president Russell Berman noted, ‘a service provider within the academy.’

If this was a normal Gothic dissertation, I might bring in the work of sociologists or historians here to trace the roots of the modern American academy back to the European medieval university—an institution with strong ties to both the Catholic church and the feudal aristocracy. I might suggest that, considering these historical ties, it seems only natural that academia could be a third target of the Gothic’s criticism.

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5 This quotation comes from Smith’s “Big Thinking” lecture at the 2012 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Waterloo. It represents arguments that were later published in her 2015 *Manifesto for the Humanities.*
If this was a normal Gothic dissertation, I would have thus laid out the beginnings of my “critical framework,” and the average reader might be lost or bored by now. But this isn’t a normal Gothic dissertation.

Katie: Is everybody buckled?

Will: I am.

Jay: I am.

My Gothic Dissertation is more like a Gothic novel—a multi-volume one that tells the story of protagonists struggling against traditional forces cleaving desperately to life in the modern world—“threaten[ing],” as Gothic scholar Chris Baldick tells us,” to fix [their] dead hand[s] upon us” (xxi).7 As in the tradition of the bildungsroman, the protagonists in this Gothic novel are on an educational journey,8 and the traditional forces they work against are outdated modes

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6 In this dissertation, I employ intertextuality as a method for literary criticism. Intertextuality was first defined by Julie Kristeva in Desire in Language as “the transposition of one or more systems of signs onto another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position” (15). More broadly, it can be understood as the shaping of the meaning of one text by means of another text. In my work, I conceive of intertextuality as a weaving together of two strands that mutually inform one another: a reading of Gothic fiction and a report on the lived conditions of doctoral training in the humanities. In the former strand, I argue that Gothic fiction—and in particular, fiction that fits within the tradition of the Female Gothic—is concerned with themes of education and pedagogy that have been overlooked by previous critics. In the latter strand, I report on recent research from the sociology of higher education to show the “Gothic” side of doctoral training, incorporating first-person accounts from personal interviews in the style of literary journalism made popular by Ira Glass. (For more on the methodology of literary journalism, particularly in the medium of radio, see Jessica Abel’s Out on the Wire [2015] and John Biewen/Alexa Dilworth’s Reality Radio [2017].) Here I deem this intertextual dissertation “more like a novel” because, as Jack Hart attests in StoryCraft (2011), Glassian literary journalism shares many techniques with novelistic storytelling, including “scene setting, characterization, and plotting” (6). Intertextuality is itself a novelistic device—one that is akin to the way of reading Rita Felski deems “recognition” in Uses of Literature (2008), thus making it method of reader response literary criticism as well.

7 In Literature of Terror, Punter asserts that “Gothic stood for the old-fashioned as opposed to the modern […] Gothic was the archaic […] that which was prior to, or opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilized values and a well-regulated society” (5). In my argument, the “civilized values” and “well-regulated society” that the Grad School Gothic resists are the democratizing principles of intersectional feminist pedagogy.

8 Although there has never been a major study to examine the educational aspects of the Female Gothic, a few of the field’s prominent critics have alluded to the need for one. As Eugenia DeLamotte puts it in Perils of the Night (1990), it is ‘not surprising’ that in the Female Gothic ‘education tends to play an important role’, because the ‘enlightened mind’ and ‘eloquence’ are the heroine’s ‘chief weapon[s] against tyranny’ (52). In “From Emile to Frankenstein: The Education of Monsters” (1991), Alan Richardson has also noted the ‘thematization of pedagogy’ in the Gothic, in ‘its opposition of naïve heroines and knowing villains, who often (like Montoni) assume a paternal position, suggesting that the line between pedagogy and tyranny is an uncomfortably fine and unstable one’ (148).
of doctoral training like the dissertation itself. Only, unlike a novel—which is fiction—this story takes place in real life.

So if this is a Gothic novel, then we need to start at the beginning. In the novels of Ann Radcliffe and her imitators—a tradition known since the 1970’s as the “Female Gothic”—the heroine starts her life in some idyllic, provincial place that’s far removed from the hustle and bustle of big city life.

Jay: Wait, we’re in Natchez?

Katie: Yeah. We’re about to go—we’re on the outskirts of Natchez. We’re about to go kinda downtown. Where some of the older stuff is.

For four-year-old me, Natchez was that place. Propped on the bluffs of the Mississippi River, two hours from Jackson and three from New Orleans, it’s right out of the pages of its own kind of Gothic novel… the Southern Gothic. But that’s a story for another time.

In her country idyll, the Gothic heroine is typically raised by doting caregivers who nurture her gifts and cherish her talents. My caregivers—the Mingees—are the reason for this trip, which I took about a month after my Prospectus defense with my parents, sister and two nephews (who you just heard). My nephews still seem a bit confused about this.

Will: Who are the Mingees?

Katie: The Mingees were our old neighbors when I was growing up. And we were very, very close with them […] we’re going to see them and meet them tomorrow. They’re very special to us. They’re not real family, but they’re like family.

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9 The Female Gothic is a sub-strain of the Gothic first theorized by Ellen Moers in a 1974 article for the New York Review of Books. While she defines it as “the work that women writers have done in a literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called ‘the Gothic,’” other feminist scholars have expanded on that definition. See Robert Miles’ introduction to the special edition of Women’s Writing devoted to the Female Gothic (1994), Gary Kelly’s introduction to Varieties of the Female Gothic (2002), and Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace’s introduction to the special issue of Gothic Studies devoted to the Female Gothic (2004).
Until we moved from Natchez to Birmingham when I was four, my family lived in a tiny house on Roselawn Drive next to Bob and Barbara Ann Mingee and their three young adult daughters, Esther, Susan, and Peggy Ann. The middle daughter—“Suzie”—was the nurturer of my young talents. My doting caregiver. She was fresh out of college—a brand new first-grade teacher—but I didn’t know that at the time. To me, she was just a kind person who I always wanted to be around. All these years later, when I visit her in Natchez, she’s still that way. Other people think so, too… shortly after this visit, she found out she was one of nine finalists for a state-wide Teacher of the Year award.

Susan: Well, I don’t know if you remember or not – and it really wasn’t put on the door for you, it was more for Katie and you inherited it – but my daddy – when y’all would come knocking on the back door at daylight on Saturday mornings (laughs) to come in the – you were ready…

Anna: Sorry – sorry about that, by the way.

Susan: No, it was hilarious. I mean, that’s why y’all are family to us […] But, Bob ended up putting a spool from a – a wooden spool from Bop Ed’s thread – and he attached it to the lower part of the screen door, because when you were coming, the handle was too high for you to reach […] And, um, many many Saturday mornings we would be, um, you would come over early, and we’d still be in bed reading, and you would want your own book […] And you would pick up your own Harlequin romance and just lay right there and read just like a grown-up would read.

I should say that back in those days I couldn’t actually read the Harlequin romances… I was just pretending to read them with no idea what kind of swash-buckling was going down in those pages. But later, when I would come back for week-long summer visits, Suzie got me reading for real. And she also got me writing.

Susan: When we were together, you and I, in the summer, and you needed something to do, it was like, “Okay! Let’s read this book! Now, draw a picture to go with it!” And then as you, um, aged, you, um, went through those different levels of development with your writing. And I think that’s when you and I started writing stories. […] And you, you came up with all kinds of stories. Um, as you have been reminded, in this visit together, you would even pick up Kentucky Fried Chicken coupons and make up stories about the
coupons. So, you always have had the imagination – you just needed some help right at first, writing down your thoughts. And, then you would illustrate those.

One of those stories—*Cinnamon Alone I*—became the basis for my personal statement… one of the documents I submitted when applying for grad school in English. I referred to *Cinnamon Alone I* to demonstrate to admissions committees my life-long devotion to reading and writing, and it worked. Among other things, it got me accepted to my Master’s program and, later, it got me here—to the Ph.D. I’d venture to say that nearly everyone else in grad school has a Suzie, too.

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Besides providing fodder for my personal statement, Suzie’s attention did something else—something important. It instilled in me a belief that I was good at something.

**Susan:** There’s nothing better for a child than for somebody to take time with them and to nurture something that they’re good at. And, um, make them feel good about themselves. And, you know, and these days and times especially, not too many children get a lot of one-on-one time with one adult who they love and who loves them.

Because of Suzie’s influence, this, to me, is how teachers are supposed to be. And, as it turns out, I’m not alone in that opinion. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, world-renowned feminist scholar and professor bell hooks advocates for something she calls “engaged pedagogy”:

**hooks:** To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin (13; 28:30 – 28:44).

hooks argues that caring for the “souls” of students, or treating them as individuals—whole, unique people—is the first necessary condition for training free thinkers. This holistic arrangement is transgressive, she argues, because it defies the typical power dynamics that position teachers as monolithic, omnipotent knowers and students as blank, passive learners. The
Gothic heroine typically starts her life under the care of such an engaged pedagogue, developing a baseline of trust and mutual respect for the authority figures around her. She learns, above all, the importance of being thoughtful and considerate of others, always striving to live her life in a moral way.

This would explain why, from the outset of these novels, the heroine is clearly presented to readers as someone with “subjective merit.” According to Gary Kelly, Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Alberta and editor of the scholarly collection *Varieties of the Female Gothic*, that “subjective merit” is the heroine’s sense of self-worth that comes from her “sensibility,” or fine feeling. According to Kelly, “This would explain why, from the outset of these novels, the heroine is clearly presented to readers as someone with “subjective merit.” According to Gary Kelly, Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Alberta and editor of the scholarly collection *Varieties of the Female Gothic*, that “subjective merit” is the heroine’s sense of self-worth that comes from her “sensibility,” or fine feeling. Ellen Ledoux, author of the book *Social Reform in Gothic Writing*, concurs with Kelly’s reading of the Female Gothic heroine:

**Ledoux:** She will be very sensitive. She will be artistic, she will be intelligent [...] Um, and she loves poetry, she loves looking at the landscape, she plays the lute. ‘Kay? So, which is like, it’s a feminine ideal of the late 18th, early 19th century.

All of her sensitivity and moral goodness make her someone that readers are supposed to root for—a curious, kind, and talented, though admittedly naïve person. (She has been reared in rustic isolation, after all.) And though the novels sometimes make it seem like their protagonists were born with these admirable traits, I would argue that it’s also often the case that they learned them under the care of attentive teachers. They were given a safe place to feel—something they’ll soon learn is rare.

Because, as I mentioned, these heroines often grow up sheltered. Naïve. And this trait comes back to haunt them when they face their next typical plot development:

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10 To use the examples that will be cited later in this dissertation: although they may have their flaws, Radcliffe’s M. St. Aubert, Shelley’s Alphonse Frankenstein, and Brontë’s Mrs. Bretton do display special regard for their charges’ individuality and overall wellbeing early in their lives.

11 Eugenia Delamotte discusses a similar archetypal characteristic of the Female Gothic heroine in her 1990 study *Perils of the Night*. She deems it the heroine’s “conscious worth” (34).
Ledoux: There will be some precipitating event—some rising action—um, that she’ll be expelled from this home. And she’ll have to either go on the road, or she’ll be abducted in some way.

Or, in this Gothic novel, she’ll go to grad school. Sure, she’s not expelled or abducted… in this story, she goes of her own volition. But often, what she finds when she gets there isn’t quite what she expected—especially compared with her earlier, more nurturing educational environment.12

In the original Female Gothic, part of this precipitating event often involves her becoming orphaned. Which, in the most basic sense, means she’s irreparably severed from those who cared for her in their early life—a common, if socially constructed consequence of the Grad School Gothic too.13 In a 2007 article for the Journal of Research Practice, for example, Carlos Andres Trujillo writes about the “lonely path” of doctoral studies (par. 2). Family members and friends from before grad school often don’t share the same frame of reference to understand your work…

Anna: So you were excited to talk to me today but you also told me that you were “freaking out.”

Susan: I was.

Anna: So, what were you so nervous about?

…and can often feel, like society more broadly, the distancing awe and intimidation that the Ivory Tower casts in its shadow.

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12 In “PhD Candidate Expectations: Exploring Mismatch with Experience” (2014), Holbrook et. al. conducted interviews with over one hundred Australian Ph.D. candidates and found that the majority experienced a negative mismatch between their expectations and their experiences of doctoral study (342). A significant number reported their experiences of supervision as one of the factors for their negative mismatch: “when candidate satisfaction with supervision is examined in relation to comments about mismatch, it is evident that they are strongly indicative of low satisfaction – a finding that supports previous re-search that emphasizes the importance of supervision in student experience” (342).

13 Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, and Hubbard offer a sweeping review of factors influencing the doctoral experience in “The PhD Experience” (2018). Among those discussed include the frequent occurrence of Ph.D. candidates becoming isolated from their old friends and family members, resulting in social isolation and mental health struggles (372).
Susan: Well, I couldn’t imagine anything that I would have to say that could help you with your, with your, um, dissertation […] I couldn’t imagine. […] But I’m so proud of you, and I, and this, um, you’re going to be our first Ph.D. in the family, girl!

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So. We’re probably now about halfway through the first volume of our Gothic novel. The heroine has been swept away from the comforts of her nurturing educational idyll and transplanted, unaware, into a house of horrors. Because she’s a woman living well before any kind of women’s rights are in effect, her life—a.k.a., her future marriage plans—will be entirely dictated by her new guardian… the most imposing Gothic figure of all—the villain. The shadowy, gruff, and seemingly all-powerful lord of the castle. As her new “caregiver,” this villain ought to promote the heroine’s quest to live a thoughtful, meaningful life, but that’s often far from the case.

As Gary Kelly describes it in his study of the Female Gothic, the heroine will now be subjected to “menace by unknown forces, the machinations of individuals […] with obscure or inscrutable motives, and/or persecution by mysterious institutions or secret organisations” (xx). A far cry from the engaged pedagogue she’s grown used to, this new, monolithic authority figure holds the heroine hostage in his labyrinth-like house to use her in some secret, self-serving plot—marrying her off to a detestable count or robbing her of her inheritance and would-be dowry for his own personal gain. He keeps her isolated through neglect, surveilling her constantly with a network of spies to ensure she remains ignorant about his plans for her. If she does get too close to the truth, he will throw her off the path with elaborate mind games that make her doubt her perceptions and her sanity. While readers can clearly see that she’s in danger, the heroine only senses it… and in the ensuing volumes we’ll clutch our pearls as we witness her undergo trial after trial—an exhausting series of close calls from which she’ll barely escape.
In the *Grad School* Gothic, things aren’t quite as blatantly diabolical, but the heroine *does* find herself in a daunting new educational environment that Leonard Cassuto, author of the book *The Graduate School Mess*, calls the “careless and shortsighted,” “teacher-centered,” and “neglectful” (13, 14, 16). And I’m not the only person to note the similarity between the *Gothic* and these pedagogically unsound school settings. Sherry Truffin, Associate Professor of English at Campbell University, identifies this trend in the 20th century *American* Gothic novels in her 2008 book *The Schoolhouse Gothic*:

**Truffin:** Even though we like to think of American schools as meritocracies and vehicles for social advancement, they are quite likely to function in ways that replicate existing power hierarchies rather than challenging them […] There’s the appearance of benevolence and the assumption of benevolence that actually can serve as a cover for something a lot darker.

Locked away in a dark, damp office in the dungeon of some campus building, the Grad School Gothic heroine will be subjected not to forced marriage, but dark “menaces” in other forms, including the exploitation of her labor mentioned earlier by Sidonie Smith and forcefully condemned by Kevin Birmingham:

**Birmingham:** If you are a tenured (or tenure-track) faculty member teaching in a humanities department with Ph.D. candidates, you are both the instrument and the direct beneficiary of exploitation. Your roles as teacher, adviser, and committee member generate, cultivate, and exploit young people’s devotion to literature. This is the great shame of our profession.

As I’ll discuss more in a later chapter, Birmingham’s statement comes from a bold and provocative speech he gave right here on my own campus. But for now, I just want to point out that his comments gesture toward what many researchers of doctoral training have found to be
the greatest “menace” of all to grad students (whether they mean to be or not): the Ph.D. advisor.¹⁴

**Livingstone:** I don’t know how you feel about your advisors, but they really become, like, these giants in your head. Ya know? These, like, arbiters of your being.

In the Grad School Gothic, the Ph.D. advisor—or, the graduate faculty member more generally—holds enormous power over the graduate student, and if they’re not careful, they can end up looking a lot like the diabolical villain of yore. In their roles as teachers, mentors, and writers of the all-important letters of recommendation for jobs, doctoral advisors truly do seem—as Josephine Livingstone says here—like “arbiters of your being.”

Livingstone, who goes by “Jo,” earned her Ph.D. in English from NYU and now works as a staff writer for The New Republic… so when a story broke about an NYU grad student, Nimrod Reitman, being abused by his Ph.D. advisor, the noted feminist scholar and Professor of German and Comparative Lit Avital Ronell, Jo was well positioned to write an article about it. The case represents the very worst of what can happen when Ph.D. advisors abuse their power—a real-life Grad School Gothic tale.

**Livingstone:** She forced a kind of intimacy between them with which he was not comfortable and she did not realize that he was uncomfortable. Right? So, this intimacy extended to, um… staying the night together, demanding his attentions, making him answer phone calls… um, ya know, if he was at a party and couldn’t answer a phone call she would get angry […] And so, she clearly had a strong fear of abandonment?

Ronell imposed herself in every aspect of her advisee’s life out of a supposed need to serve her emotional health. She stalked him, cornered and isolated him, played mind games by telling him

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¹⁴ In their recent, comprehensive review of the research on doctoral students’ completion, achievement, and wellbeing, Sverdlik et. al (2018) note that there is “extensive literature linking dissatisfaction with supervision to doctoral student attrition,” however “faculty are often unaware of their potential role in student dropout” (370). See also Isabelle Skakni, “Doctoral studies as an initiatory trial: expected and taken-for-granted practices that impede PhD students’ progress” (2018).
he was “in denial” when he resisted her advances, and that her therapist agreed he should just go along with their intimate relationship (Reitman v. Ronell, 68-69). Hearing this, one might wonder why Reitman didn’t report his advisor on the spot for such inappropriate behavior. One reason, as Sherry Truffin points out, is that,

**Truffin:** Academia *is* a place of mystified power. Um, ya know, and that makes it—that creates conditions for abuse […] Because… power *is* knowledge. Power is the power to create knowledge and be believed.

In academia, “power is the power to create knowledge and be believed.” Ronell held more of that power than Reitman… he was in *her* castle, her institution, where she was protected. And, as in the Gothic, the structure of that castle supports the abuse. Just on a pragmatic level: if your graduate advisor is abusing you, you simply don’t have much recourse. There’s no HR department overseeing those working relationships—only other faculty members who often have a vested interest in maintaining collegial relationships with their permanent peers over transient graduate students.

Another reason Reitman didn’t come forward lies in the outsized role that Ph.D. advisors play in the pinnacle of their advisees’ educational journeys – securing a job. As former Ph.D. turned writing consultant K.A. Amienne puts it in a *Chronicle of Higher Ed* article that went viral back in 2017 (just after the news about Harvey Weinstein broke), “Anytime you have a highly competitive system in which a single person has the power to make or break someone else’s career – whether it’s the crowded, greasy pole of Hollywood or a flooded Ph.D. pipeline – you will have abuse” (par. 6). Sure enough, according to Reitman’s account, Ronell had all but promised him she would get him an academic job when he finished his Ph.D.

**Livingstone:** Um, so… he did not have the option to withdraw his affections because he, essentially, in the simplest terms, feared retaliation. Right? Um, which would be… her feeling upset and perhaps making his life much harder as a result.
To “marry” the job of their dreams in this Grad School Gothic system, in other words, the heroine needs to find a way to give her villain what he wants.

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At this point in the Grad School Gothic novel, some readers will be rolling their eyes. “Hyperbole at its finest,” they may be saying. “The Ronell case is one extreme, isolated example of abuse that cannot and should not be generalized to describe any kind of universal experience of grad school.” Maybe so.

Maybe it’s true that the majority of graduate students haven’t experienced sexual abuse at the hands of their advisors, but maybe where there’s smoke there’s fire. Maybe, as Corey Robin said in an article for The Chronicle of Higher Ed, the Ronell-Reitman scandal tells us more about “[how] intense, [how] extreme, [how] abusive” the “pervasive imbalance of power in academe” really is than it does about sexual harassment (par. 18). As he says, that imbalance of power is “one that many graduate students have had to negotiate. And should not have to negotiate” (Robin par. 18).

Or maybe that response of the eye-rollers is, itself, part of what makes grad school feel so Gothic—the ease with which the experiences and identifications of the “persecuted heroine” are disregarded and trivialized. When she tells authority figures, “I see that kind of thing happening on a smaller scale all around me, too,” and those authority figures tell her she’s overreacting, or just plain wrong, it feels like the signature power move of the Gothic. Maybe that’s why so many of the Ivory Tower’s most powerless and underrecognized are asserting their right to say “me too” in the astounding, if underrecognized, #MeToo movement in academia.15

15 A quick gloss on #MeToo discourse in academia: citing K.A. Amienne’s viral article ‘Abusers and Enablers in Faculty Culture (The Chronicle of Higher Education, Nov. 2017), well-known Ph.D. advocate and author of The
Maybe the ones rolling their eyes should consider what or who it is they’re trying to protect.

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Now back to our imperiled heroine. As if the villain wasn’t enough to deal with, there’s often another, even greater threat haunting her in every corner of the castle—literally.

**Punter:** Gothic has always been to do with ghosts and phantoms, with that which comes back, that which cannot be laid to rest.

As David Punter point out here, there’s another defining feature of the trials and tribulations the Gothic heroine must undergo, and that’s the relation between the present and the past:

**Punter:** The notion of inheritance has always been interesting in the Gothic, because there’s always the possibility of a very troubled inheritance [...] So that your quest, in the Gothic novel, is sometimes to find out, what is it that’s been done in the past that means that I have to suffer like this in the present?

Another reason the abuse between Ronell and Reitman is so indicative of the broader power dynamics of doctoral advising is that it does deal with a powerful past that haunts us in the present. What we’ve inherited in the modern academic humanities, according to Timothy Burke, is something he calls the “academic star system”:

**Burke:** “The academic star system of the 1980’s and 1990’s in the humanities created a group of people who believed they were better than everyone else and a group of people who were invested in believing the stars were better than everyone else. This has done lasting damage to the humanities.”

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Burke is a Professor of History at Swarthmore, and after the Ronell/Reitman scandal broke, he went on a bit of a tare about it on Twitter—part of which you just heard. Back when humanities departments were more flush with university cash, he says, they could—and did—actively court fashionable intellectuals to join their ranks… in particular, people who were responsible for importing the radical and provocative European theory that would change the way scholars thought, read, and studied texts in the American humanities. Once these “stars” were recruited to such prestigious positions, Burke says, they were given a lot of leeway.

Burke: And they’re becoming, kind of, um, almost cultishly successful figures within a set of academic disciplines in the American system […] You get more money, you get autonomy on a scale that other people don’t get, um, you get freedom from some forms of responsibility, all in the name of the thought that you’re thinking deep thoughts that no one else is thinking. And that you have work to do that you need to be free to do. And at the same time, a kind of heedlessness about what the “little people” think.

So how is this power of the past making us suffer in the present? For one thing, many of the stars from the 80’s and 90’s do still exist in our academic universe, despite the general downturn in the humanities’ influence. Judging by her CV, Ronell would certainly seem to fit the bill. And because graduate students are well aware of this powerful constellation of stars, they’re afraid to speak out when abuses do occur. Here’s Jo again:

Livingstone: So I had heard, um… that’s funny, nothing ever seems like a rumor when you hear it at the time […] I had heard that she was this, like, person with very intense emotional relationships to her students that… asked a lot.

Although the NYU sexual harassment case didn’t become public knowledge until August of 2018, Ronell’s abuses of power were already an open secret among grad students. Whenever Jo would express any kind of disappointment to her friends and colleagues about her own advisor, she says,
Livingstone: People were saying, like, “Yeah, but, you could have… someone who was forcing their way into your life like Avital Ronell.” So, that’s how I heard about it. Kind of organically.

Although grad students at NYU knew, nobody wanted to speak out against such a renowned professor… and for good reason. Another vestige of that power of the past that makes grad students suffer in the present? Turns out there were plenty of other stars ready to rush to Ronell’s defense.

Livingstone: So […] An open letter was circulated amongst really the highest echelons of scholarship in the humanities—especially in critical theory. It received over a hundred signatures.

Signatures from the biggest stars of feminist scholarship, no less… chief among them Judith Butler, the incoming president of the Modern Language Association. The letter, which was addressed to the president and provost of NYU, spoke out against Reitman, claiming that he was on a (quote) “malicious campaign” against Ronell (Butler par. 1) But not only did these outspoken feminists not believe the accuser—the basic feminist protocol in a situation like this—they also went on to use many of the same moves used by defenders of Harvey Weinstein: Ronell is talented and accomplished, they said (Butler par. 2). She holds an important position at a top institution (Butler par. 2). They knew her personally and can vouch that she just wouldn’t do that (Butler par. 3). And finally, if you fire her, there will be retaliation (Butler par. 3).

Punter: What is it that’s been done in the past that means that I have to suffer like this in the present?

Livingstone: “The Ronell cheerleaders […] are almost universally intellectuals who once upon a time considered themselves cultural outsiders. Queer theorists, post-colonial scholars, feminist thinkers. They act as if they are a politicized coalition defending a vulnerable person without the awareness that they are now the tenured, the published, the well-off, the powerful. Precisely the demographic that #MeToo proposes to investigate.”

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As we near the end of this first volume of the Grad School Gothic, the truth of the heroine’s situation has begun to dawn on her. Despite her isolation, she’s found a way to attain this knowledge by making allies of a sympathetic servant or two—or, in the modern world, a growing body of her grad school comrades emboldened to speak out on social media by movements like #MeToo. Through her narrow window, she can see the castle ramparts tumbling down slowly—stone by stone—and yet, the fortress still stands, seemingly held together by the sheer will of its towering overlord.

Or maybe it’s held together by what, in *The Schoolhouse Gothic*, Sherry Truffin calls “epistemic violence”:

**Truffin:** There’s a kind of violence in the way that we know or the way that we choose to know. Um… or that way that we, more generally, define.

Our entire way of knowing—the foundation of Western epistemology upon which the Grad School Gothic is built, says Truffin—is itself *violent*. A harming of others in order to establish power over them.

**Truffin:** Because, if we define scholarship as knowledge creation, as it’s typically understood – but you also think of teaching as the construction of the educated student, or the process of creating the educated mind, it’s also sort of… doing violence to that mind by how we define and circumscribe and limit…

This argument about the insidious relationship between knowledge and power is derived from the work of highly influential philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault. Normally we think that knowledge *gives* one power.

**Truffin:** And Foucault said, “No no no no.” Well, he – I mean, he didn’t say that wasn’t *true*, but he said um, “Power gives you Knowledge.” Because… power *is* knowledge. […] He’s really saying in a sense that the teacher invents the student. Ya know? The teacher defines the student and invents the student and creates the student. Um, and… uh… and so you can see that in and of itself as a kind of violence.
In this way, Truffin’s notion of epistemic violence is similar to what higher ed advocate Beth Godbee has referred to as “epistemic injustice”—or, denying someone their fundamental right to experiential knowledge (597, 594). Rather than recognizing that their students already possess valid and valuable knowledge that they do not—much of which is gleaned from their unique life experiences—epistemically violent or unjust teachers decide that only they and their academic equals have the right to think they know anything. In some cases, maybe it’s yet another vestige of the “academic star system” that refuses to lie down and be buried. In others, though, it’s purely accidental.

**Truffin:** Being a college professor is… ya know, about becoming certified as an expert in your field. It’s not – ya know, you don’t really learn how to teach.

Researchers of the doctoral training process have concluded the same thing—that often, the so-called “violence” occurs out of pedagogical ignorance, the product of Ph.D. advisors themselves being trained to be scholars, not teachers. As bell hooks says, academics are often the opposite of engaged pedagogues:

**hooks:** During my twenty years of teaching, I have witnessed a grave dis-ease among professors (irrespective of their politics) when students want us to see them as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge (15).

Even though they almost always mean well, Ph.D. advisors often don’t recognize how much power they have over their advisees’ self-esteem and future careers, and thus how much their roles as teachers and mentors matter. But, as Leonard Cassuto says,

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17 A recent study published in *Nature Biotechnology* (March 2018) reports that, compared to the general public, graduate students are six times more likely to experience depression and anxiety than the general public. The researchers deem their findings evidence for a “mental health crisis” in graduate education and go on to state that “it is alarming” how much graduate students’ mental health relies on the stability of their relationships with faculty advisers and mentors (283).
**Cassuto:** We’ve got to do things differently because we’re wrecking people’s lives. And it’s just unacceptable. (15:15–15:20)

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A heroine with “subjective merit” enters a Ph.D. program full of passion and individuality and trust in the benevolence of the system. Primed by her early caregiver, she still considers herself to be on a quest for a meaningful life, but she’s now separated from that mentor and unaware that she’s been swept into a system of epistemic violence set up—consciously or unconsciously—by an academic discipline desperate to replicate itself. Often, her ideas must change to fit the existing version of what counts as knowledge… not the other way around.

The ensuing volumes detail her entrapment in hair-raising detail… but what kind of Gothic novel would this be if it didn’t end with some suspense?

**Laura:** He was responding with intense anger, as if I had done something to provoke his anger? As if I was responsible for his anger? And… all I did was submit a document that I was supposed to submit.

Next time on *My Gothic Dissertation.*
CHAPTER ONE: Emotional Invalidation and the Education of Emily St. Aubert

After she’s been carried off for unknown reasons to Udolpho—an ancient and foreboding castle set high in the mountains of northeast Italy—Emily St. Aubert looks around her room. It’s a lonely space, filled with dark, heavy furniture, located far apart from her aunt, uncle, and their handful of servants in a remote part of the castle that chills her with something “more than fear” (234). Looking past the room’s contents, she discovers something disturbing in the architecture itself.

*Cass (narrator)*: To call off her attention from subjects that pressed heavily on her spirits, she rose and again examined her room and its furniture. As she walked round it, she passed a door, that was not quite shut, and, perceiving, that it was not the one, through which she entered, she brought the light forward to discover whither it led. She opened it, and, going forward, had nearly fallen down a steep, narrow staircase that wound from it, between two stone walls (Radcliffe 235; part 2, 37:09–37:24)

She discovers that her room contains a secret passageway. Like anyone would be, Emily is curious where it leads and whom she might find on the other side, but it’s also very dark, and she’s alone, so she’s afraid to go into it. *Also* like anyone would be.

*Cass (narrator)*: Closing the door, therefore, she endeavoured to fasten it, but, upon further examination, perceived, that it had no bolts on the chamber side, though it had two on the other. By placing a heavy chair against it, she in some measure remedied the defect; yet she was still alarmed at the thought of sleeping in this remote room alone, with a door opening she knew not whither, and which could not be perfectly fastened on the inside (Radcliffe 235; part 2, 37:38–38:02)

This scene takes place in the second volume of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, a novel published in England in 1794 that’s widely considered to be an archetypal example of the Gothic genre. The story begins in the picturesque French countryside of the late sixteenth century, and in the first volume and a half, readers have already seen the genteel and sensitive Emily witness the death of first her mother, then her father; fall in love and become engaged to
the worthy Valancourt; and come under the guardianship of a paternal aunt, the self-absorbed Madame Cheron who forcefully breaks Emily’s engagement and steals her wedding plans for herself, entering into an ill-advised match with an enigmatic and unfeeling Italian named Montoni. Emily and her aunt are then whisked away to Venice by this mysterious signor, where Emily is nearly forced to marry a loathsome, wheedling casino owner named Count Morano. Still desperately in love with her long-lost Valancourt, Emily is spared from becoming the Countess Morano only by the unknown circumstances that have brought her, to Udolpho, in a hasty trip undertaken by dark of night and left unexplained by her uncle Montoni.

In the remote and vulnerable chamber her uncle has assigned to her, Emily drags more furniture over to barricade the mysterious door with the help of Annette, a charming, highly excitable maidservant, and then passes an anxious night in her new abode. The next morning, feeling invigorated by the sublime scenery she sees outside her window, Emily determines to explore the secret passageway. But when she returns to the door, she discovers something even more disturbing than before.

_Cass (narrator):_ When she turned from the casement, her eyes glanced upon the door she had so carefully guarded, on the preceding night, and she now determined to examine whither it led; but, on advancing to remove the chairs, she perceived, that they were already moved a little way. Her surprise cannot be easily imagined, when, in the next minute, she perceived that the door was fastened.—She felt, as if she had seen an apparition. The door of the corridor was locked as she had left it, but this door, which could be secured only on the outside, must have been bolted, during the night. She became seriously uneasy at the thought of sleeping again in a chamber, thus liable to intrusion, so remote, too, as it was from the family, and she determined to mention the circumstance to Madame Montoni, and to request a change (Radcliffe 242; part 2, 56:17–57:05)

To change rooms is a reasonable request, one would think, since there’s solid evidence that this chamber is unsafe, meaning her wellbeing—read: her _virginity_, that most valuable asset of middle-class women—could be compromised. Regardless, Madame Montoni, per usual, can’t
seem to muster any concern for her niece’s circumstances, absorbed as she is with her own miserable marriage. She brushes Emily off and refers her to her husband, who soon storms into the breakfast room seeming even more angry and unapproachable than usual.

**Cass (narrator):** Their breakfast passed in silence, till Emily ventured to request, that another apartment might be allotted to her, and related the circumstance that made her wish it.

**Cass (Montoni):** I have no time to attend to these idle whims, said Montoni. That chamber was prepared for you, and you must rest contented with it. It is not probable, that any person would take the trouble of going to that remote stair-case, for the purpose of fastening a door. If it was not fastened, when you entered the chamber, the wind, perhaps, shook the door and made the bolts slide. But I know not why I should undertake to account for so trifling an occurrence. (Radcliffe 243; part 2, 59:18–59:55)

*Maybe the wind shook the door and made the bolts slide.* This explanation is… *ludicrous.* And Emily knows it.

**Cass (narrator):** This explanation was by no means satisfactory to Emily, who had observed, that the bolts were rusted, and consequently could not be thus easily moved; but she forebore to say so, and repeated her request. (Radcliffe 243-244; part 2, 59:56–1:00:06)

Nevertheless, she persisted. And, as you might suspect, Montoni doesn’t react well.

**Cass (Montoni):** If you will not release yourself from the slavery of these fears […] at least forbear to torment others by the mention of them. Conquer such whims, and endeavor to strengthen your mind. No existence is more contemptible than that, which is embittered by fear. (Radcliffe 244; part 2, 1:00:07–1:00:30)

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Welcome back to *My Gothic Dissertation*. In this episode, we’ll be talking about *emotional invalidation*—a type of interaction that not many people know by name, but that happens all the time. It’s a concept that I’ll use to break down exactly what’s so frustrating about this scene between Emily St. Aubert and her uncle, Signor Montoni. I’ll argue that emotional invalidation lies at the heart of what’s so terrifying about the Gothic… and about grad school. Because after
eight years as a grad student, I’ve noticed *plenty* of it occurring between students and faculty, where it seems to insidiously reinforce power imbalances that are detrimental to our discipline. It’s a problem not only because it makes people miserable and increases time to degree, but also because it discourages new insights and innovation, obstructing advances that could potentially make the academic humanities seem more, well, *human*. And relatable.

But let’s back up and start at the beginning.

The concept of emotional invalidation was first theorized by Marsha Linehan, a researcher and practitioner of clinical psychology who’s been highly regarded in her field since the early 1990’s. Linehan is probably best known for her work with chronically suicidal patients and, later, with Borderline Personality Disorder—a condition defined, among other things, by a patient’s extreme difficulty regulating her emotions (Linehan 11). And I say “her” here purposefully, because as Linehan notes in the encyclopedic manual she wrote about treating the condition, most of the patients who meet the criteria for Borderline Personality Disorder are women (Linehan 4). One possible factor that Linehan found that could lead someone to suffer from this disorder is growing up in a chronically emotionally invalidating environment—or, an environment where their emotions and private experiences are often trivialized, marginalized, or punished (Linehan 14). Exactly like what you just heard happen to Emily St. Aubert. But to first understand what it means for emotions to be invalidated, it would help to understand a little bit more about emotions themselves—at least, the theory of emotions upon which Linehan’s ideas are based.

Linehan subscribes to the philosophy of mindfulness that was brought into medical and psychological discourse in the United States by Jon Kabat-Zinn back in the late 1970’s. The philosophy borrows much from Buddhism—and specifically, from the writings and practices of
the well-known Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hahn. And, for anyone who’s ever been taught they shouldn’t cry or get angry, this philosophy carries some pretty revolutionary ideas. Here’s Marsha Linehan giving an overview on a YouTube channel called “Borderline Notes”:

**Linehan:** If you look at an evolutionary point of view, why do we have emotions, okay? So what’s the function of them, okay? The first function of emotions is that they motivate behaviors needed to solve common problems in evolution, essentially. That’s what it is. So they motivate the behavior. Okay. Second, emotions communicate. They communicate to others. Okay? And the third thing they do, is they communicate to yourself, which they say to you, “Check this out.” In a sense, they’re a rapid-fire system. (“Function” 0:00–0:37)

For example, Linehan says, emotions like fear tell us how to react quickly when something dangerous is coming towards us. Or how to efficiently motivate the vulnerable—like children—to run in a similar situation of danger.

**Linehan:** And you know right away. You’re motivated highly to get those kids off—out of there. So they live. However, you go down and you say, (calmly) “Okay, children, I think we should run.” Okay, that’s not communicating an emotion, and you’re unlikely to get them to run. What gets them to run is when you say, “RUN!!!” So, it is an automatic communication system. (“Function” 0:58–1:21)

In other words, emotions have a *purpose*. It may not always be as clear-cut as trying to prevent you from succumbing to imminent death, but nevertheless, the theory of mindfulness is based on the idea that, no matter how small or insignificant, emotions have an important function. They carry information. And they should *not* be ignored—not by ourselves, and certainly not by our caregivers.

**Linehan:** If you’ve got an emotion that when you go to communicate it, no one listens to you, or you get invalidated, you have to ask yourself what would you do. What you do, if you think it’s important, is you escalate. But the other person, if they don’t agree with you, when you escalate, what they do is they also escalate their invalidation. So you end up in these situations where emotions start going up, mainly because they’re not getting validated. (“Function” 1:40–2:05)
Emotions don’t just go away when ignored, says Linehan. In fact, attempting to ignore emotions only makes them intensify. This is what happens with emotional invalidation. To learn more about this, I contacted Dr. Meredith Elzy. Dr. Elzy, who gave me permission to call her Meredith, is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of South Carolina Aiken. She wrote her dissertation on emotional invalidation at the University of South Florida, and she’s since published several articles and focused her research, teaching, and clinical work on the subject.

**Meredith:** I generally describe it as when someone has an emotional experience—either external or internal—and they receive messages from someone else that those emotions are incorrect or unimportant. Um, and that can be done through a variety of different behaviors, um, both overt and covert behaviors but the bottom line is it has to be, another person does something to make that person feel that their emotions are unimportant or, or incorrect.

What emotional invalidation looks like in practice, Meredith says, probably sounds pretty familiar to… just about everyone.

**Meredith:** I think the best example, um, are things like, “Come on, suck it up.” Or, um, it’s, “What are you so upset about? It’s just (blank).” Ya know, fill in the blank. Or, um, “I don’t really know why you feel that way; that’s not really that big of a deal. You need to get over it.” Um, those are some pretty common examples that we say—people say regularly.

Or perhaps…

**Cass (Montoni):** I have no time to attend to these idle whims […] that chamber was prepared for you, and you must rest contented with it.

Emily shares a private experience—her observation about the door, and her logical deduction that someone must have been near her while she was sleeping—only to be met with a trivializing response. Her well-founded fears are explained away with an entirely unfeasible explanation about the freaking wind. It’s a textbook example of emotional invalidation, and Emily’s
response—pressing her claim and becoming more convinced that she’s unsafe—also follows what Linehan would predict. But then:

Cass (Montoni): If you will not release yourself from the slavery of these fears […] at least forbear to torment others by the mention of them. […] No existence is more contemptible than that, which is embittered by fear.

Montoni responds, as expected, by escalating his invalidation, now adding anger and condescension to punish her. To shame her out of believing herself.

If these types of interactions are rare, or if the person on the receiving end doesn’t perceive anything problematic or hurtful, says Meredith, emotional invalidation can be mostly benign. But when someone is trapped in an environment that is “chronically invalidating”—when they’re told again and again that their emotional experiences are wrong or don’t matter, then serious problems can occur.

Meredith: When somebody is chronically emotionally invalidated, they don’t learn to trust their own emotions. So, and this is, again, when we look at it from a developmental perspective. To me, the most damaging piece of emotionally invalidating behaviors, chronically, is they never form a sense of self or a strong identity. Because emotionally, they don’t trust their own internal experiences.

“They never form a sense of self or a strong identity, because emotionally, they don’t trust their own internal experiences.”

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Over the years, several critics have pointed out that The Mysteries of Udolpho can be read as a kind of bildungsroman—a story of education, or the forming of a sense of self as Elzy would say—since the narrative primarily follows Emily St. Aubert’s maturation from innocence to experience.¹ And in my reading, The Mysteries of Udolpho is a story of education in which

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¹ For instance, see Pierre Arnaud, “Emily ou de le’éducation: The Mysteries of Udolpho, Bildungsroman féminin (Bulletin de la Société d’Etudes Anglo-Américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe Siécles 43 [Nov 1996]: 39-50), and Isabelle
emotion invalidation gets in the way. Although of course Ann Radcliffe would never have used that term, that doesn’t mean she hadn’t witnessed or experienced the phenomenon herself.²

Because I’m going to go out on a limb here and say that women and other marginalized people in the Western world have been struggling to have their experiences believed since well before Radcliffe’s time.

So, in my reading, this tale of chronic emotional invalidation—which is emblematic of the Gothic genre as a whole—details the psychological terror that comes from never having your perceptions or experiences believed by other people, especially authority figures—and, as a result, beginning to doubt them yourself. Here’s why I see it that way: the entire narrative arc of The Mysteries of Udolpho—a nearly 700-page, four-volume novel—is the story (spoiler alert) of Emily St. Aubert’s eventual marriage to her beloved Valancourt… a man she meets on page 31 and who is kept from her for the next 640 pages or so. For nearly three full volumes—45 chapters—readers are infuriated with the knowledge that, if Emily had only accepted Valancourt’s very first proposal, she could have avoided all of the repetitive and miserable suffering that fills the majority of the novel. But at the crucial moment, as I’ll show, she didn’t trust herself.

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² In Ann Radcliffe: The Great Enchantress (Manchester UP, 1995), Robert Miles characterizes Radcliffe as a sharp social critic with “a hard edge, one sharpened by the robust, liberal, critical energies of the dissenting ‘middle classes’ to which she belonged” (4). He also argues that Radcliffe’s novels “belong within the category of the ‘aesthetically satisfying’” because they “make power visible in unexpected ways” (19).
In my reading of *Udolpho*, the tale of invalidation all starts during Emily’s *actual* education—the lessons imparted to her by her father, M. St. Aubert. Although Emily’s childhood seems idyllic—full of long walks in shady groves and spontaneous bouts of poetry…

**Cass (Emily):** How pleasant is the green-wood’s deep-matted shade / On a mid-summer’s eve, when the fresh rain is o’er (Radcliffe 16; part 1 43:06–43:14)

…nevertheless, she’s already being taught that her emotions are wrong and she shouldn’t trust them. Her father, St. Aubert, is a thoughtful man, devoted to his family and wary of the materialism and “dissipation” of city life in Paris. Having chosen to reside in the isolated splendor of southern France, he oversees Emily’s education very closely, because he realizes something about his daughter’s disposition…

**Cass (narrator):** She had discovered in her early years uncommon delicacy of mind, warm affections, and ready benevolence; but with these was observable a degree of susceptibility too exquisite to admit of lasting peace. […] He endeavoured, therefore, to strengthen her mind; to enure her to the habits of self-command, to teach her to reject the first impulse of her feelings, and to look, with cool examination, upon the disappointments he sometimes threw in her way. (Radcliffe 5; part 1 12:08–12:22, 12:50–13:08)

In other words, St. Aubert recognizes that Emily is sensitive and intuitive. She feels acutely and has intense private experiences of emotion. So, he takes it upon himself to “throw disappointments in her way” to toughen her up. Never considering the possibility that her emotions may carry useful—even urgent—information and therefore serve a positive function in her life, he decides that her feelings make her weak, and that she needs to learn “self-command”
to “reject” them and “strengthen her mind.” He uses the very same language Montoni will later echo…³

Cass (Montoni): Conquer such whims, and endeavor to strengthen your mind. (Radcliffe 244; part 2, 1:00:22–1:00:25)

And while he doesn’t have contempt for Emily for her fine feeling like Montoni does, St. Aubert nevertheless uses the same tactic of emotional invalidation against her because he’s decided it’s better for her. Emily lovingly obeys these injunctions because she adores her father, so when he delivers his final lesson to her from his death-bed:

Cass (St. Aubert): We become the victims of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them […] Beware, my love, I conjure you, of that self-delusion, which has been fatal to the peace of so many persons; beware of priding yourself on the gracefulness of sensibility; if you yield to this vanity, your happiness is lost for ever. (Radcliffe 79; part 1 3:43:24–3:43:27; 3:45:46–3:46:04)

…she unflinchingly promises to obey…

Cass (Emily): It will be almost my only consolation to fulfil your wishes. (Radcliffe 81; part 1 3:48:29 – 3:48:33)

She agrees to his philosophy of self-command—ironically imprisoning herself in an internal system of self-doubt that mirrors the external constraints Montoni will enforce upon her later in his fortress. And it will come back to haunt her.

Meredith: When somebody is chronically emotionally invalidated, they don’t learn to trust their own emotions. […] They never form a sense of self or a strong identity. Because emotionally, they don’t trust their own internal experiences.

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³ In Literature, Education, and Romanticism (Cambridge UP, 1994), Richardson makes a similar point: “The power/knowledge dynamic underlying the relation of Emily St. Aubert and her father is structurally cognate with that which facilitates Emily’s exploitation by the villain Montoni, who cruelly plays on this resemblance, taking on the voice of the father-instructor, when she balks at his designs” (204).
Laura: Um, for a long time, I thought it meant that I wasn’t good enough? If I couldn’t get him to work with me, then I wasn’t good enough?

We’re going to switch, now, to the real-life Grad School Gothic. This is Laura, a Ph.D. student in English, describing a painful, yet all too typical experience of invalidation in action.

After completing a Master’s degree at a well renowned school on the east coast, Laura chose her Ph.D. program because the school housed a couple of professors whose interests aligned with hers. In particular, there was one who would fit Timothy Burke’s description of an academic “star.”

Laura: I had heard that they are “just brilliant.” Incredibly dense, um, as far as their thoughts are dense and they take a while to suss out, but you know it’s worth it […] So, because of this brilliance or perceived brilliance, um, he’s well connected. Um, what I was told by a faculty member in my Master’s degree was that students who work with him get jobs. And… in a field that’s so saturated […] um, it’s nice to have a stand-out person on your committee who’s well-connected and can get you a job.

Things went well for Laura during the first three years that she worked with this “star.” She took classes with him and earned his compliments on her work—a big deal, because as Laura says…

Laura: I heard that the person was incredibly hard to please. Um, that they were hard to read? Both literally read their writing in e-mails and interpersonal writing, and also hard to read physically. Body language, tone, things like that. […] I had also heard from graduate students that this person either loves you or hates you. And he’ll decide really quickly what side you fall on. And there’s really no making it up if he hates you. So, I felt like I had a very short window to get into his good graces.

She managed to make it through that window, though, and it felt really good. She felt like she had accomplished something. Knowing she had “impressed” him even helped her overcome other obstacles, because they paled in comparison to achieving this person’s admiration. In her third year, he agreed to serve as the chair of her Comprehensive Exam, which she managed to prepare for in an impressive six months. After it was over, he told her she passed (quote) with “flying colors.”
But then, Laura says, the confusion began a few months later, when she sent him an early draft of her Prospectus (which, remember, is the dissertation permission slip).

Laura: He wrote me back and said that, um, he had “serious concerns” at that point, after advising my Comps, that he… would direct my dissertation. Um, he thought he wasn’t the best advisor. And I didn’t understand this. I remember I cried after I received the e-mail. Because I didn’t understand – it seemed like a very sudden shift. Like, for three years I had gotten, like, “Your work is excellent,” “You should publish,” “You passed with flying colors.” And then, as soon as I started doing my independent work on my Prospectus – just a few months, two or three months after I had passed my Comps successfully – he told me that […] he had serious concerns about my ability to do independent research. For the dissertation. But he didn’t tell me why, and he didn’t explain where that was even coming from.

Maybe the wind shook the ideas in her brain and made them slide.

Like Emily St. Aubert, Laura had made an observation—in this case, an interesting connection, in the 19th century, between developments in scientific theories of the human body and representations of bodies in the literature of the time. The connection was important, she argued, because the literature had helped the general population to absorb those new scientific ideas, and their understandings were sometimes used to justify racist and sexist beliefs. So if we can pinpoint the cause of some of those lasting misconceptions about the body, Laura conjectured, we could potentially better understand and combat historical causes of racism and sexism.

That was her perception. Her private experience or observation that she communicated to an authority figure, as Linehan and Elzy would say. And, again like Emily St. Aubert, there was a lot at stake in this observation—namely, Laura’s progression toward the degree into which she had already invested so much of her time and energy… not to mention the contribution to social justice. However, when she went to communicate that high-stakes observation to an authority figure—someone who had the power to confirm or deny its validity, and therefore Laura’s
progression in the program—it was unceremoniously rejected. Trivialized. This powerful person told her the connection she observed simply was not there. Her perception was all wrong. And beyond that, more importantly, she was all wrong. All of a sudden, he no longer considered her, personally, fit for academic work. All of the self-confidence Laura had built up began to crumble.

**Laura:** He told me that he had “serious concerns” about my ability to do independent research.

But to Laura, like to Emily, it was also a moment that felt a lot like this:

**Cass (Montoni):** The wind, perhaps, shook the door and made the bolts slide.

_Ludicrous_. After so much positive feedback, so much validation and affirmation of her abilities that she had witnessed with her own eyes, how was she suddenly no longer fit for academic work?

According to Dr. Isabelle Skakni, Senior Research Associate at Lancaster University and Head of Doctoral Training and Support at the University of Applied Arts in Switzerland, Laura’s advisor seems to subscribe to the common idea that graduate school is not so much an open and clear-cut process as an initiation into an elite group, clouded with ambiguity and the subjective wills of existing members. Skakni holds a bachelor’s degree in Career Guidance and Counseling, a Master’s in Educational Sciences, and a Ph.D. in Administration and Assessment in Education, and she’s conducted research on graduate programs in North America, the UK, and Switzerland. In her recent article titled “Doctoral studies as an initiatory trial,” she breaks down some common, problematic conceptions of grad school that hinder rather than help people as they work towards the Ph.D. First, she says:

**Skakni:** Ph.D. students are expected to be autonomous. So, uh, which of course is not bad in itself, because it is your thesis, you’re an adult, and you’re in charge of your own
progression. But, um, being autonomous can be defined in different ways? And in certain cases, it becomes like a good excuse to not help someone.

**Laura:** Like, to just jump ship because your student sends you a bad draft? (laughs) It seems like, uh, really unfair. Like, your job is to read my drafts. And help me.

Laura realized this herself—how *unhelpful* and even unfair it was that her advisor seemed to have decided that his job was no longer to advise—but she also knew there was little she could do. She thought maybe if she just kept trying, she could convince this professor that she and her project were worthy of his attention.

**Laura:** But then I thought, ya know, he said, “If you can send me something better, if you can start over, if you can impress me, I’ll reconsider.” So I sort of took that as my goal […] To do something better. To write something better.

Nevertheless, she persisted. It’s to Laura’s credit that she had such resilience. That she decided to try to “write something better,” as she says here. It’s also part of the familiar pattern of invalidation Linehan lays out:

**Linehan:** If you’ve got an emotion that when you go to communicate it, no one listens to you, or you get invalidated, you have to ask yourself what would you do. What you do, if you think it’s important, is you escalate.

I’d like to pause here, because I know the skeptical listeners out there are probably saying, “But Linehan is talking about *emotion*, and what Laura was sharing was not that. Laura was sharing a literary interpretation, and her advisor was just doing his job, being a critical reader so she could shore up the weak parts of her argument.” Here’s Skakni again.

**Skakni:** For most people, writing is a very emotional task. Actually, the whole doctoral process is very emotional. And, you can feel… I mean, especially in writing, you can feel overwhelmed by emotion while writing and it can concretely affect your writing and your productivity […] In my research and in my environment […] I heard many supervisors being like, *astonished* by the emotional struggles of their Ph.D. students. Which is very surprising, because they did a Ph.D. themselves! (laughs)
So, Skakni found in her research that—despite the faculty’s astonishment about this fact—writing is wrapped up in emotion. And indeed, so is the entire process of getting a Ph.D. In another recent article, Skakni studied the reasons and motivations behind people’s decisions to pursue doctoral education, and she found that, for many, the Ph.D. is a kind of “quest for the self.” A *bildungsroman*, if you will. So naturally when their work towards the degree is invalidated, their emotions—and their identities—feel invalidated too.

Again I hear the voice of skeptics putting forth a counter-argument that goes something like this: it’s unfortunate that people feel so much emotional pain in the Ph.D. process, and I can certainly understand that it’s because they see the Ph.D. as some ultimate fulfillment of their self-actualization. But the Ph.D. has traditionally been a path to a *career*, and so a pursuit of self-actualization is actually the wrong reason to get a Ph.D. Here’s Skakni.

**Skakni:** Uh… what I say is, there– actually there are no good reason or bad reason to do a Ph.D. And actually, I think to a different degree everybody doing a Ph.D. experiences a kind of quest of the self.

Okay, sure, says the skeptic. Maybe it’s not up to me or the profession to decide what’s a valid or invalid reason to get a Ph.D. But if you choose to pursue a Ph.D. in a “quest for the self,” enter at your own peril. This is still a professional training program, and your emotional quest won’t fit well here. It takes a “thick skin” to get through grad school.

**Meredith:** I would say that’s one of the most emotionally invalidating things you can say to somebody. (laughs)

Back to Meredith Elzy.

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4 According to Skakni’s research in “Reasons, motives, and motivations for completing a PhD: a typology of doctoral studies as a quest,” *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 9.2 (2018): 197-212, this is especially true for first-generation students who see the Ph.D. as a route to self-actualization or social mobility. She reports that they also tend to be highly vulnerable to criticism (206).
**Meredith:** We experience emotions in every context of our life. So, if we want to pretend like we enter a professional environment and we shut our emotions off? We can pretend all day long, but that’s not the reality. So, if you’re in an environment where you’re told, “Emotions are not in here. This is not an emotional context,” well then every emotion you feel… that’s wrong! [...] So that sort of framework – having that kind of an umbrella over that relationship or that environment – is in itself, very emotionally invalidating.

In other words, while skeptics think the emotional individual is wrong and needs to change to fit the system, there’s a growing body of people out there who say no. The system needs to change to better accommodate the individuals in it.

**Meredith:** Your emotions are so your core.

Again, Meredith Elzy.

**Meredith:** If someone is saying to you, if someone is validating what you’re experiencing, you glean from that that they care about you as a person. And… so, to me the crux, the core, why emotional validation is so important is because that’s how we communicate to each other we care? And if you communicate to somebody that you care about them? They can decrease their vulnerability, they can be more real, they can be open. And from a learning perspective, that’s when the magic happens. Right? If they’re feeling guarded and closed because they can’t trust you? Um, they don’t think you care about them? They’re not… they’re not willing to open their minds to what you have to say and be vulnerable to be able to learn that and glean that. And… um, it’s why as a teacher, um, when I’m in the classroom, the most important thing to me is my students feel comfortable with me, they feel like I care about them.

**Skakni:** What emerged from my analysis is… as you said, that doctoral studies can be seen as three different types of quests. [...] Those three quests to me are, to some extent, a proof that academia must change or is changing. And that an initiatory trial approach can’t be relevant anymore.

So, skeptical listeners hopefully appeased, let’s return to Laura’s persistence. Things didn’t just escalate this one time with this one draft. Over the next ten months, she would submit no fewer than *eight drafts* to this professor, hoping with each one to finally convince him that her perceptions were valid, and that, once and for all, he should agree to be her dissertation advisor.
And each time, the invalidation would escalate too, to the point where it began to feel like punishment.

**Laura:** I have sort of stamped in my brain the section of the e-mail that goes into all caps. And he’s telling me, I think, if I recall correctly, everything I’m *not doing* correctly.

**Cass (Montoni):** If you will not release yourself from the slavery of these fears […] at least forbear to torment others by the mention of them. No existence is more contemptible than that which is embittered by fear.

**Laura:** He was responding with intense anger, as if I had done something to provoke his anger? As if I was responsible for his anger? And… all I did was submit a document that I was supposed to submit. Um, after this whole like, these months of like, “impress me, impress me, impress me.”

Laura was trapped in a chronic loop of invalidation, communicating her ideas again and again, each time trying to convey the validity of her observations—of her *self*—to a person who simply would not be convinced. And, as Linehan or Elzy would predict, Laura stopped trusting her own perceptions—both of herself and of others.

**Laura:** And the worst thing about that is, even though a few other professors who I deeply respect and admire told me that it *was* good enough, and it was a contribution and that they were excited about being on my project, I think the way that I, for sure, but also people around me had built him up? I felt like without his approval, like, they must just be being nice to me. Because he’s not being nice to me. Like I felt, um, his invalidation of my work way outweighed the validation of […] other professors.

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Back to Emily and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. After her flawed emotional education, our heroine is already susceptible to being controlled by others and not trusting herself. Her father, well-meaning though he may be, doesn’t *just* invalidate Emily’s emotions… he preaches that she should do it to *herself*. And so, she does. And here we get to the crucial moment when she has the opportunity to side-step everything but doesn’t.
A few weeks after her father has been buried and she’s settling up some final affairs before submitting to the “care,” if you can call it that, of Madame Cheron, Emily is surprised by a visitor…

**Cass (narrator):** She went to a window, that overhung the rivulet, and, leaning over it, with her eyes fixed on the current, was soon lost in melancholy reverie […] In the next moment, a door opened, and a stranger appeared who stopped on perceiving Emily […] ‘Good God! Can it be—surely I am not mistaken—ma’amselle St. Aubert—is it not?’ / ‘It is indeed,’ said Emily, who was confirmed in her first conjecture, for she now distinguished the countenance of Valancourt (Radcliffe 100; part 1 4:43:09–4:43:17, 4:43:57–4:44:01, 4:44:31–4:44:45)

Emily thus resumes her acquaintance with Valancourt, whom she and her father had met while traveling the countryside to ease their grief over the death of her mother. It’s worth noting here, too, that while he was alive, St. Aubert definitely approved of the feelings he saw forming between Emily and Valancourt…

**Cass (St. Aubert):** This is a very promising young man; it is many years since I have been so much pleased with any person, on so short an acquaintance. (Radcliffe 57; part 1 2:35:32–2:35:42)

But despite her father’s clear approval, when Valancourt makes a modest romantic advance towards Emily the day after their reunion—asking if he can begin a formal courtship because he is worried that he may never see her again when she goes to live with her aunt—Emily says no. Why?

**Cass (narrator):** She feared to trust the preference her heart acknowledged towards Valancourt and to give him any encouragement for hope on so short an acquaintance […] Yet, though the thought of dismissing Valancourt was so very painful to her, that she could scarcely endure to pause upon it, the consciousness of this made her fear the partiality of her judgment, and hesitate still more to encourage that suit, for which her own heart too tenderly pleaded. (Radcliffe 106, 107; part 1 5:01:45–5:01:54, 5:02:15–5:02:33)
“Her own heart too tenderly pleaded.” In other words, because she wants to marry Valancourt so much, she turns him down.

And pretty much immediately after Valancourt has finished pleading with her to let him see her again, just after Emily has exercised the utmost self-command in refusing him once and for all, Madame Cheron enters the narrative and the entire Gothic plot begins to fall into place.

**Cass (narrator/Madame Cheron):** At this moment an hasty footstep approached from behind the plane-tree, and, turning her eyes, Emily saw Madame Cheron. She felt a blush steal upon her cheek, and her frame trembled with the emotion of her mind; but she instantly rose to meet her visitor. ‘So niece,’ said Madame Cheron, casting a look of surprise and enquiry on Valancourt, ‘so niece, how do you do? But I need not ask, your looks tell me you have already recovered your loss. (Radcliffe 109; part 1 5:09:44–5:10:16)

Emily is immediately misjudged and accused of impropriety in this first meeting with her new care-giver, and, after Valancourt quickly excuses himself, Madame Cheron expresses her disapproval of him, too. Still, though, Emily has more chances. Valancourt doesn’t give up, and after a series of mishaps, Madame Cheron eventually changes her opinion when she learns that his aunt is one of the most rich and influential women in the region. Emily and Valancourt finally become engaged with the approval of Madame Cheron, only to have her make a total reversal when she marries Signor Montoni and goes along with the other plans he has for Emily… plans that will take her away from France and Valancourt.

But in a chance meeting with Valancourt on the night before her departure, Emily again has the chance to circumvent her impending suffering, but she doesn’t trust herself enough to follow her instincts. After Valancourt and Emily declare their undying love for one another and pledge to stay true during this “cruel separation,” he proposes again:

**Cass (Valancourt/narrator):** ‘Why should we confide the happiness of our whole lives to the will of people, who have no right to interrupt, and, except in giving you to me,
have no power to promote it? O Emily! Venture to trust your own heart, venture to be mine for ever!’ (Radcliffe 154; part 1, 7:15:51–7:16:08)

“Venture to trust your own heart.” Even he recognizes that the problem is Emily’s inability to trust herself, though perhaps he doesn’t realize how difficult it is for her to overcome because he, as a man, hasn’t experienced the same kind of chronic invalidation she received during her “education.” Surprising no one, Emily rejects him one last time and seals her fate—and his—for the next several hundred pages.

**Cass (narrator):** Duty, and good sense, however hard the conflict, at length, triumphed over affection and mournful presentiment [...] and she acted, perhaps, with somewhat more than female fortitude, when she resolved to endure a present, rather than provoke a distant misfortune. With a candour, that proved how truly she esteemed and loved him, and which endeared her to him, if possible, more than ever, she told Valancourt all her reasons for rejecting his proposals. (Radcliffe 155; part 1, 7:17:55–7:18:03; 7:18:25–7:18:36)

“Somewhat more than female fortitude.” Gross.

Things continue to get drawn out for a few more pages—including Valancourt’s very legitimate warning that Montoni may be up to no good in whisking her and her aunt off to Italy—but ultimately, they part ways. Readers—or, at least, this reader—watch the fall-out of Emily’s self-doubt for the next few volumes with increasing frustration, especially since, through all her struggles—nearly forced marriages, exposure to the seediness and “dissipation” of Venetian life, imprisonment in a castle, the continual threat of rape—she continuously refers back to her love for Valancourt as the only chance for escape. A chance that she clearly had but forfeited, because she had been taught not to trust herself.

I wish I could say that by the end Emily learns to think for herself and ignore the voices of her neglectful, abusive caregivers. As the reader nears the end of the novel, they keep hoping that maybe, *finally* Emily will just run off with Valancourt and give up on trying to get the
approval of yet another meddling and flawed guardian—this time, the Count de Villefort who
takes Emily in after she finally escapes Udolpho. But no. The reader ends up disappointed. The
Count has been keeping Emily and Valancourt apart, because polite society has been circulating
all kinds of nasty rumors about him, things having taken a pretty tough turn for him, too, while
Emily was holed up in Montoni’s castle. Only after the Count learns third-hand from a series of
men that those rumors about Valancourt are mostly false does he finally give his blessing, and
our heroine joyfully does what she had wanted to do all along. Marry Valancourt.

As it turns out, Emily St. Aubert isn’t saved by learning to trust herself. At the end of the
novel she remains deferential to the powerful men around her, trapped in the Gothic reality that
her life is entirely out of her own control. This is 1794, after all. But maybe that feeling of
frustration over her continued entrapment is, in the end, what we’re supposed to walk away with
as readers.5

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Laura: (crying) There’s something about him that’s so overwhelmingly patriarchal.

Back to Laura, our real-life Grad School Gothic heroine.

Laura: I’ve had to do a lot of work on how I respond to him. Because it’s often, um, I
often with him have a trauma response that I’ve had to other men in the past. So, in some
way like, pleasing him academically, being on his good side, is sort of a way to hold that
trauma, those responses, that fear at bay.

5 There is an ongoing debate among scholars whether Radcliffe’s stance on gender politics—and the commentary on
gender politics within the Gothic genre at large—is conservative or progressive. See, for instance, Charlie Bondhus
“Sublime Patriarchs and the New Middle Class in Ann Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho and The Italian”
(Gothic Studies 12.1 [May 2010]: 13–32); JoEllen DeLucia, “From the Female Gothic to a Feminist Theory of
History: Ann Radcliffe and the Scottish Enlightenment” (The Eighteenth Century 50.1 [Spring 2009]: 101–115);
Lauren Fitzgerald “Female Gothic and the Institutionalisation of Gothic Studies (Gothic Studies 6.1 [May 2014]: 8–
18); Diane Long Hoeveler, “The Construction of the Female Gothic Posture: Wollestonecraft’s Mary and Gothic
Feminism” (Gothic Studies 6.1 [May 2014]: 30–44).
Laura, unlike Emily St. Aubert, eventually recognized how damaging it was for her to be trapped in this invalidating cycle. As so often happens in Ph.D. training—especially when academic “stars” are involved—she realized that she found herself working desperately not to further her own intellectual interests and abilities, but to figure out a way to please this one professor. To get his stamp of approval and, eventually, his signature on a letter of recommendation for jobs. And every time she thought she had reached her goal—convincing him to serve as her dissertation director—she found the target had been moved yet again, always just outside her reach.

Laura: So, multiple times he would… I would even use the word “threaten,” because I think he knew how much it meant to me to work with him? So he would hold our advisor-advisee relationship over my head and basically say, like, “Unless you impress me, I’m not going to advise you.” [...] That felt a lot like an abusive relationship. [...] I mean, I guess thinking about it now, no wonder it took me ten months to produce this Prospectus. Because… like, (crying) opening the Word document, um, became impossible. Because it became about, like, “Is he going to no longer work with me? Who is going to advise this? Am I valuable? Are my contributions valuable?” Um, and he’s made very clear that he thinks they are not. Because they do not impress him.

She even reached out for help, but… people just kept telling her to do whatever it took to keep him on her committee.

Laura: No one acknowledged that he could be in the wrong. Um, except one person who basically said, “What can I do about that? I can’t do anything about that. He’s a full professor. He is who he is.”(29:00) […] Every institutional structure is meant to keep him in power.

Again, everyone expected Laura to change, not the system in which she found herself trapped. Even realizing this, though, she still pressed on for a while. But after months and months of being stalled out in this cycle of seeking his approval and being told again and again that her work wasn’t good enough, that she didn’t deserve his support—she finally made her escape.

Well, sort of.

Laura: In the most recent e-mail […] he told me basically that I couldn’t impress him, and he wanted to step down—which, for the record—he’s always made my responsibility.
So he’ll always say, “If you want me to step down, I’m happy to step down.” […] He says, “I’m sorry (comma) Laura (comma) that I cannot match your enthusiasm for the project.” And I think that’s so inappropriate. Like, I don’t need an apology. I don’t need an “I’m sorry,” I just need you to help me write the project that I want to write. […] I don’t know. It seems manipulative or cruel or some way to absolve himself rather than actual… actually to… be sincere about his treatment of me and my work.

After receiving this e-mail, Laura broke the cycle. She never even responded—just walked away and asked someone else to be the head of her committee. Everything you’ve been hearing from her so far came from a conversation we had about a week before she held her Prospectus defense. Finally. And I’m happy to report that she went into the same crowded closet I had been in for my own Prospectus meeting, and she passed. Not only that, she passed on her terms.

Laura: I said, my first point, I said, “There are three major things I want to accomplish today, and the first one is that I need you guys to tell me where I’m doing my work well, and where I’m succeeding professionally. […] And they actually went around the room and told me where I was succeeding. (laughing) […] And I don’t think I would have had that confidence if he was in the room. (laughs)

You can hear the joy in Laura’s voice here, because asking for and receiving positive feedback was a major win. She said a female professor complimented her on how she took control of the meeting, too.

Once again I played the part of the skeptical listener and asked Laura if there was any way that her newfound confidence was due to that invalidating advisor. Maybe his influence had been good for her after all. And even further than that, maybe this had been part of his plan all along—to build her up by first breaking her down. Maybe it had all been some kind of master plot he had set in motion for her benefit.

Laura: The first adjective that comes to mind is “yucky.” (laughs) That’s in my critical vocabulary. Yucky. […] It’s not necessary for you to destroy someone before you rebuild them. It’s not necessary for you to rebuild them! Like, I am a whole person. […] So, if we’re talking about graduate school as this larger sort of, ya know, plot or something. Or larger narrative… like, there are structures we have to adhere to. There is the
Prospectus—the Comps and the Prospectus and the dissertation—but how I negotiate those is my business.

Maybe what it all comes down to is this: this Ph.D. is Laura’s quest. It’s her story—her narrative—her plot. So for someone to act the part of M. St. Aubert or Montoni—the patriarch who knows best, telling the heroine that she’s not really seeing what she’s seeing, feeling what she’s feeling—that’s pretty “yucky.” And disempowering. The exact opposite of what someone on a quest needs from an advisor. Laura finally realized this and escaped…but not entirely unscathed.

Laura: People keep saying, like, “How do you feel?” And I feel good, but I have this weird lingering guilt! That I… that I didn’t tell him that I had a meeting… (pause) (crying) And like maybe, like maybe I got through by the skin of my teeth? Like maybe it’s still not good enough? (pause) Like, if he read it now, would he think it’s still not good enough? He did read it! He read the draft. [...] And even one professor who I knew to be so difficult, he said, “These revisions are excellent.” Like, “You’ve obviously done so much work.” [...] And that was huge. Coming from him. [...] Um, but even when he said that, I thought like, “Why?” (crying) “Why? Won’t this other person just get behind my work?” And why am I so concerned about this still? Like, why does it matter? Ugh!

Maybe, as in The Mysteries of Udolpho, what we’re supposed to walk away from this story with is a similar frustration that, despite our heroine’s happy ending, the system that threatened to destroy her happiness is still intact. And it still haunts her.

Thanks for listening to My Gothic Dissertation. In the next episode, we’ll move on to another Gothic hero—Victor Frankenstein—whose narrative takes place around the time Radcliffe wrote Udolpho… only in the deep Gothic recesses of a German university. Like Emily, and Laura, he also struggles for validation from the patriarchal authority figures in his life, but he chooses to defy their attempts to shame him, pressing forward with an innovative creation that will grow to mythic proportions. Next time on My Gothic Dissertation.
CHAPTER TWO: Frankenstein; or, the Modern Lift Master (part one)

Frau Blücher: *Follow me please…*

When Frederick “Fronkenschteen” inherits the estate of his grandfather Victor in the 1974 Mel Brooks classic *Young Frankenstein*, it’s not the infamous laboratory or equipment that interest him the most.

Frau Blücher: This is your room. It was your grandfather Victor’s room.

It’s the library. The books.

Frederick: I see. Well [claps] there seem to be quite a few books!

Frau Blücher: This was Victor’s [pause] the baron’s medical library.

Frederick: And where is my grandfather’s *private* library?

Frau Blücher: I don’t know what you mean sir.

Frederick: Well, these books are all very general. *Any* doctor might have them in his study.

Frau Blücher: This is the only library *I* know of, Doctor Frankenschtone!

Frederick/Frau Blücher: Fronk-en-schteen.

Frederick: Well. We’ll see.

After initially being deflected by Cloris Leachman as “Frau Blücher,” the housekeeper of the estate and, in this re-telling, Victor Frankenstein’s former lover, Fronkenschteen (played by Iowa’s own Gene Wilder) eventually discovers a secret passageway that leads to what he desires…

Frederick: What *is* this place?

Igor: Music room? [twang of violin string]

Inga: But there’s nothing here but books and papers!
Frederick: Books and papers… It is! This is my grandfather’s private library! I feel it! Look! Look at this!

Laid out on his grandfather’s desk is a large volume with the comedic, Mel Brooksian title How I Did It: by Victor Frankenstein – the “it,” of course, being how he created his infamous monster. Fronkenschteen proceeds to read it from cover to cover. This is what he’s been looking for all along – the precise knowledge of his grandfather’s notorious work – the instructional guide for making a monster – the very thing he’s been insisting he doesn’t care about, has distanced himself from with the revised pronunciation of his name.

Frederick/Frau Blücher: Fronk-en-schteen.

As it turns out, he did care a little bit after all.

Frederick: (ecstatic) IT! COULD! WORK!!!!!

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Although the film Young Frankenstein purposely, even gleefully re-inscribes a lot of early Hollywood’s inaccuracies in depicting Mary Shelley’s work – things that were never actually in the novel, like the hunchbacked assistant, the Gothic castle, the bolt of lightning causing the monster to come to life – Fronkenschteen’s interest in his grandfather’s books is actually a pretty insightful moment that harkens back to the 1818 text.

Subtitled “The Modern Prometheus,” the original novel Frankenstein deals – like so many stories in Western civilization – with forbidden knowledge. It’s a reference to the Titan Prometheus who, in ancient Greek mythology, disobeyed the wishes of Zeus and stole fire from Mt. Olympus to give to the humans. This fire is often interpreted as a metaphor for the divine spark of knowledge that, once lit, can continue being kindled to become ever more large and powerful. And in the hands of humans it is not only life giving, but also potentially destructive –
in the literal sense that it, like, burns things, and also in the metaphorical sense that it challenges
the omnipotence of the gods… the more humans know, the less power the Olympians have over
them. And this is why Zeus decreed that Prometheus would be chained to a rock and tortured
forever… his liver being eaten out of him by eagles every day only to regenerate overnight for
the next round.¹

Subtitling her novel “The Modern Prometheus” casts Shelley’s protagonist, Victor
Frankenstein, as a similar figure who filches knowledge from the divine realm – only he does so
at the University of Ingolstadt in the late 18th century.² There, after years of intense study in his
rented student lodgings, he discovers the secret to creating human life. But here’s where the
insightful moment by Mel Brooks comes in: Frankenstein’s years of intense study focused,
among other things, on three ancient philosophers that people in positions of authority didn’t
want him reading. Old, forbidden books. The stuff of private libraries. And those who didn’t
want this Modern Prometheus reading these things – the Zeuses of Mary Shelley’s story – were
Victor’s own father, Alphonse Frankenstein, and one of his professors at the University – a crass
old natural philosopher named Monsieur Krempe. And the ancient philosophers they didn’t want
Victor reading?

¹There are many variants of the Promethean myth. In Hesiod’s Theogony and Aeschylus’s Prometheus Bound, for
instance, Prometheus is not technically a Titan but only the son of one. There are also variations concerning
Prometheus’s motivation for stealing the fire for the humans: in Hesiod’s version, Zeus withheld the fire from
humans to punish Prometheus for trying to trick him (528); in Aeschylus, Prometheus provides fire among many
other gifts to the humans to save them from Zeus’s plan to execute the human race upon his succession as leader of
Olympus (446-466). The last relevant variant concerns Zeus’s punishment of Prometheus. In Hesiod’s telling, the
eagles eat Prometheus’s liver every day (521). In variations including that of Aeschylus, Prometheus suffers this
living torture only every third day (1015).
²As has been pointed out by Gary Harrison and William Gannon in their witty imagining of Victor Frankenstein’s
Institutional Review Board proposal and by Christa Knellwolf and Jane Goodall in their collection titled
Frankenstein’s Science, Ingolstadt was widely known in the early nineteenth century as the seat of the Illuminati,
whose founder Johann Adam Weishaupt (1748 – 1811) hailed from the town and worked at the university as a
professor of law (Harrison and Gannon 1146; Knellwolf and Goodall 4). In my interview with Paul Monod, he
affirmed this association and maintained that “as soon as [Shelley] said ‘Ingolstadt,’ she has implied that there is
some connection with the Illuminati.” (9). Without putting too fine a point on it, it seems at the very least that
choosing this setting was meant to invoke the kind of occult, forbidden knowledge that modern scientists disdained.
**Krempe:** Ah, Paracelsus. An arrogant and foolish Swiss!

**Victor:** Albertus Magnus!

**Krempe:** His nonsense was exploded five hundred years ago!

**Victor:** Cornelius Agrippa!

**Krempe:** A sorcerer! An occultist! What is your name?

**Victor:** Victor Frankenstein, sir. Of Geneva.

**Students:** [laughter]

This imagined first exchange between Victor and Krempe is from the 1994 film *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, and it isn’t far off from what Victor really says about his discouraging educational history in the novel — the occasion for which is often forgotten by modern readers.

Shelley’s story begins with a frame narrative, in which an ambitious naval explorer named Robert Walton finds a haggard, near-death Victor drifting across the Arctic Sea on an iceberg.

**Walton:** His limbs were nearly frozen, and his body dreadfully emaciated by fatigue and suffering. I never saw a man in so wretched a condition (Shelley 58; Clegg 20:24 – 20:32).

His startling appearance — coupled with the fact that Walton’s ship is trapped motionless in a sea of ice — gives Victor good reason to tell his tale, beginning with the early years growing up in

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3 It has also been widely acknowledged that Walton’s expedition into uncharted territory mirrors Victor’s own quest for knowledge — an example of the common “doubling” device in early novels that allows Victor (/Shelley) the opportunity to reiterate the ‘moral’ of his tale. Frances Ferguson has argued that Walton and Victor represent a model of the Romantic notion of “generation” that allows for mutual instruction — a type of pedagogy that Mary Shelley implicitly promotes (117). Steven Marcus’s less favorable reading is that the comparison reveals both Walton and Victor as “adventurous overreachers” who are situated as Other in human society and yet who also cast Nature as Other (195, 198). Anne Mellor has an interesting take: she argues that Walton withholds judgment of the creature because — unlike everyone else in the novel besides the elder De Lacey — he first learns about the creature through Victor’s story and not through direct sight of him. This circumstance, Mellor argues, reveals Shelley’s argument that visual perception is a misleading path to knowledge, and that humans typically interpret the unfamiliar, the abnormal, and the unique as evil” (129–130, 134). See also Rauch and Swingle.
Geneva, and how one summer he made a chance discovery that would change the course of his
life forever.

Victor: When I was thirteen years of age, we all went on a party of pleasure to the baths
near Thonon. The inclemency of the weather obliged us to remain a day confined to the
inn. In this house, I chanced to find a volume of the works of Cornelius Agrippa [...] A
new light seemed to dawn upon my mind (Shelley 67–68; Dempsey 9:47 – 10:16).

Agrippa was a 16th century German theologian, and scholars have generally assumed the
book Victor found was one of the three volumes of his De occulta philosophia – or, Of Occult
Philosophy – a kind of compendium of both learned and folk ideas about magic (Macdonald and
Sherf 67, n.2; Monod, personal interview). Victor recalls how dazzled he was by his discovery,
but when he presented the book to his father, he “looked carelessly at the title-page,” recognized
Agrippa’s name…

Victor: (quoting his father) Ah, Cornelius Agrippa.

…and said,

Victor: (quoting his father) My dear Victor, do not waste your time upon this; it is sad
trash (Shelley 68; Dempsey 10:33 – 10:41).

After recounting this memory, Victor pauses to tell Walton that, on reflection, it’s this moment
that set into motion the series of events that would lead him to create a monster and
bring about his life’s ruin (Shelley 68). And this is important, because – as far as I know – no
other literary scholars have given this moment the credit it’s due. Frankenstein has widely –
famously – been read as a novel about hubris (Smith 4). Overreaching ambition and pride.

People consider Victor’s conquering of human mortality to be motivated by an impulse to
challenge the power of God and achieve personal immortality through fame, but in my reading,

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4 David Punter goes so far as to argue that the “seeker after forbidden knowledge” is a well-worn trope of Gothic
fiction, and he casts Victor Frankenstein as the archetype of the genre (87).
it’s not God that Victor is challenging. It’s his teachers. Those who cast themselves as the mortal keepers of knowledge who can dictate to Victor what is “sad trash” and what is not. And what he really wants isn’t fame – rather, it’s to redeem the work that so captivated his imagination. To show his father and Krempe not only that they were wrong in trying to forbid him from reading those books, but also that the forbidding of any knowledge from interested students is just… bad pedagogy.

Victor: I cannot help remarking here the many opportunities instructors possess of directing the attention of their pupils to useful knowledge, which they utterly neglect (Shelley 68; Dempsey 10:20 – 10:30).

Anna: In other words, when they say things like, (with Victor) “Do not waste your time upon this. It is sad trash” (Shelley 68; Dempsey 10:37 – 10:41).

This moment at the inn with his father is the first in a series of intellectual confrontations – episodes of what Sherry Truffin would call “epistemic violence” (22) – that cause Victor to rebel. As he tells Walton, had his father had a little more patience – had he taken the time to explain that “modern” science had disproven Agrippa’s theories and therefore had “much greater powers” – then, Victor says, he probably would have dropped it. But, like Prometheus challenging Zeus, Victor was only made more defiant by his father’s “cursory glance” – the careless brushing off of his intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm. He doubled down in his obsession with the occult, determined to demonstrate the worthiness of his interests despite his

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5 A Foucauldian reading might hold that, in terms of the knowledge-constructing apparatuses of power, the distinction between God and other authority figures like teachers is unimportant because they are part of the same hierarchical system of oppression. I would argue, however, that interpreting Victor’s oppressors in terms of power/knowledge as his teachers rather than an abstract figure like God allows for a different reading of Shelley’s critical intentions in the novel. Rather than being a work of philosophical or even theological criticism, Frankenstein becomes Shelley’s commentary on concrete, historical concerns over educational practices.
father’s attempts to divert them. To deem them unworthy of serious pursuit. To block his access. With shame.

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Parking Machine: Lot is full now. Please wait.

On a dreary morning in November, about six months after passing my Prospectus, I’m in my 2008 Honda Accord, a slowly drifting iceberg stranded in a sea of cars waiting to get into the parking lot of the EPB – the English Philosophy building. We’re all just idling here impatiently behind the automated gate – the Lift Master – waiting for people to exit the lot so we can enter. It’s a “one-in-out-out” situation you’d expect from the some kind of night club – only the spot we’re waiting to enter is actually four and a half floors of poorly lit brutalist architecture that was recently voted the ugliest building in the state of Iowa. Still, though, it’s a campus hot spot because it houses two under-funded general education courses that every student is required to take – Rhetoric and The Interpretation of Literature, which is what I need to get in to teach.

Anna: Okay, um. I am in my car… Hold on, gotta move up. [pause] Two people, actually three people, just gave up in front of me. Turned around and drove away. But, I’m going to go try and talk to some of the other people who are sitting in line.

On this day, it begins to dawn on me that this whole parking lot situation feels like a metaphor for the general feeling of blocked access that’s plagued me through this entire grad school experience. And since I have a kit of recording equipment from my Radio Essays class, I work up the nerve to get out and interview the people in front of me. I want to know who they are,

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6 There are those who interpret this moment in the opposite way. Samuel Vasbinder argues that Victor loses interest in the occult after his father’s discouragement, and his later re-animation project is founded solely in modern science: “Victor’s retreat to an attic room and his nocturnal collecting expeditions are not alchemic but dictated by necessity, as will be shown in the last chapter. Why should we attempt to read otherwise?” (60). I would say that Victor’s discussions of occult philosophy with M. Krempe and M. Waldman at Ingolstadt indicate his continued interest in the subject and suggest we should read otherwise.

7 According to a reader poll conducted by Business Insider.
why they need to get into the lot, and if they find this situation as frustrating as I do. The first car I approach is a blue Mercedes SUV. The driver seems startled but agrees to talk to me.

Anna: And um, so how long have you been waiting in this line?

Interviewee 1: I think it’s already ten minutes?

Anna: Um, do you have a class in there?

Interviewee 1: Oh, yeah. I have a class. It’s in Lindquist Center, I think? Yeah.

The Lindquist Center – possibly the second ugliest building in the state of Iowa. It houses the Education department. He tells me that he’s an undergrad – a sophomore – and he waits in this line three days a week, like me.

Interviewee 1: So, basically my class starts at 12:30, so, ya know, I always come here at 11:40, you know – and maybe always wait until 12:10, I think I can go in and find the parking lot. [whistle begins to blow]

Thirty minutes to get in. Pretty typical. That giant work whistle, by the way, is at the nearby power plant, and it signals that it’s now 12:00, meaning thirty minutes is also the amount of time I have before I should be calling roll at the front of my classroom. [whistle ends, sound of knocking on another car door]

Anna: Sorry, did I scare you? [laughs]

Paola: Yes, just a little bit.

Anna: Um, I’m doing a radio story on the EPB Parking Lot line… would you be willing to answer a couple of questions for me?

Paola: Sure…

Anna: Okay, so um, what’s your name?

Paola: Uh, Paola.
Anna: Okay. Hi Paola. I’m Anna. Um, so how long have you been waiting in this line today?

Paola: Umm, I’ve been waiting approximately one hour.

Anna: One HOUR?!

Paola: Yes…

I find out that Paola is another undergraduate student, and unlike most, she’s not actually waiting to get into a class. She’s been in this line for an hour, she tells me, because she needs to pick up a computer from her friend.

Paola: So, the person like can’t leave the building, and obviously I can’t like park my car and go in? So I’ll just wait it out, which is fine. I currently don’t have anything to do. So, it all works out.

Unfortunately, I do have something to do, so for me it doesn’t really all work out. But I thank Paola for her time anyway and move on.

I did this thing for three days – getting out of my car and interviewing the people in front of me – and each time, every single person I talked to was an undergraduate student. One of them was one of my undergraduate students.

Anna: First, what’s your name?

Thomas: Thomas.

Anna: Hi Thomas, I’m Anna. You look familiar… were you one of my students?

Thomas: Yeah, for Rhetoric class. Yeah.

Anna: Yeah! You were my Rhetoric student! Hey. How are you doing…

As nice as it is to see them, it doesn’t feel quite right to be competing for access to resources with my own students. But what also doesn’t feel right is that, while I was conducting all of these interviews with the undergrads in front of me, there was something else happening, too. Right
beside us there was this other line that we were all restricted from entering – or, really, it’s kind of a non-line, because there’s never anyone in it. It’s reserved for faculty members, and periodically as we were talking, they would zoom past and enter the lot with their pre-paid passes. No thirty-minute wait. Not even a one-minute wait. They’d just pull up, swipe a card, and go right in. And if that’s not frustrating enough, once they got through the gate there’d also be these large swaths of empty parking spaces on reserve for them… just lying in wait to receive their Subarus and Volkswagens, taunting all of us in the plebeian line.

Every time a faculty member would zoom past, I’d ask the undergrad I was interviewing how they felt about it, including this junior named Shayna. At first she said that no one should get special privileges, but then she made one important caveat.

Anna: Do you think there should be any priority for who gets to get into the lot and who doesn’t?

Shayna: Um, no. No, I don’t think so. Besides teachers, because I know that’s important for them to be there on time. But they already have – so they can go ahead and go in.

Anna: Well actually I’m a teacher.

Teachers already have a line, she was saying. The one people were zooming past us in. And when I revealed to her that I’m a teacher, she seemed kind of shocked at first, but then she asked something pretty telling.

Shayna: Are you – do you lead discussion? Or are you like a teacher of like the…

The question is whether I’m a “real” teacher or merely a “discussion leader” – a Graduate Teaching Assistant who does things like take attendance, grade papers, and lead break-out discussion groups once a week for large lecture classes. Still a person, for the record, who is a “real teacher” and deserves reliable access to their workplace. And I did serve as a discussion
leader for “Intro to the English Major” when I first came here back in 2013, but for the past four years I’ve been independently teaching the same intro-level courses as the faculty members in my department… even though I’m still technically called an “assistant.” Unwittingly, Shayna’s question revealed the divide she and many others seem to see between grad student teachers and “real” teachers – the divide between me and the ones that can glide right past this gate.

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Just like the line for the EPB parking lot, only so many make it through this gauntlet of Ph.D. work in the United States… According to the Council of Graduate Schools, only about 50% of students who start doctoral programs in the humanities finish – at least, in their first ten years (Sowell 6). And while that may seem like a long time, according to a 2016 report by the Modern Language Association, the average number of years it takes to complete a Ph.D. in the humanities is 9.2. (MLA 17). To get an M.D. – that is, to be a medical doctor entrusted with other people’s lives – takes just eight years of grad school. Of course, that doesn’t include all of the residencies that follow, but still – post-docs are a common path for humanities Ph.D.’s as well. Meaning that, in the United States, the time it takes to be able to teach Shakespeare to college kids is not all that different from the time it takes to be able to perform surgery on them. Why? What could possibly be so important about teaching college lit courses that it takes this long for someone to prove they’re worthy of doing it? Who or what are the Lift Masters in that process, and what is the freaking hold up?

Parking Machine: Lot is full now. Please wait.

For those of us trapped in the pursuit of our English Ph.D.’s, Lift Masters come in many forms. And a lot of them are psychological.
Now back in the car, I’m stuck idling indignantly behind this Lift Master again – the Master of Lifting or *Not Lifting* the Gate. And from here, I can’t help but see its unwavering arm as reminiscent of another kind of barrier I’m stuck behind as well – my own feeling of intellectual subordination at this stage in my career. It’s as if the twelve-foot, reflective steel arm morphs before my eyes into the Alphoneses and Krempes of my own education story… the ones who, in their well-intentioned and less-blunt way, have nevertheless told me my ideas are “sad trash” and not worth pursuing. Because every step so far – my Comps exam, the Prospectus meeting – it all feels like trying to prove that my ideas – my interests and powers of perception – are enough to grant me access to some kind of Ph.D. Promised Land… my own personal spot in academia. Each time, it feels like I’m being asked to produce some sort of pass that adheres to a set of English discipline rules I don’t completely understand. And I’ve managed to keep producing one up until this point that’s somehow – bafflingly – turned out to be valid… but every time it seems to be just barely so. And its just barely-ness makes my ability to produce it the next time even less sure-footed, because I’ve lost faith in its validity. In *my* validity.

I feel ashamed that such important people seem to find my perspective so flawed, but at the same time – like with Victor – there’s this hard-headed persistence too. Through all of this, it feels like the only thing keeping me from being one of those 50% that turn around and give up – maybe driving to the nearest marketing firm or Starbucks drive-thru to submit a resume – is my own sheer stubbornness. This conviction that I *do* deserve a spot in that lot… I’m more than just some undergrad who needs to pick up a computer from her friend. And, in this process of getting my Ph.D., the more I feel like I’m being treated that way – like some frivolous underling on a mundane mission – easily brushed off and invalidated – the more hard-headed I become.

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When Victor arrives at the University of Ingolstadt in some undisclosed year of the late eighteenth century, he’s immediately met with more disregard of his interests – another unyielding gate standing between him and what he wants to study. Soon after arrival he meets with M. Krempe – and, although it occurs a bit differently in the novel than in the film version you heard earlier, the outcome is pretty much the same.

**Victor:** He received me with politeness and asked me several questions concerning my progress in the different branches of science appertaining to natural philosophy. I mentioned, it is true, with fear and trembling, the only authors I had ever read upon those subjects. The professor stared. (Shelley 74; Dempsey 6:43 – 6:55)

Sure enough, in response to Victor’s meek proposal of his academic interests, Krempe assumes the familiar position of indifferent authority, scoffing, “Have you […] really spent your time in reading such nonsense?” (74).

**Victor:** (quoting Krempe) Every minute […] every instant that you have wasted on those books is utterly and entirely lost. You have burdened your memory with exploded systems, and useless names. Good God! In what desert land have you lived, where no one was kind enough to inform you that these fancies, which you have so greedily imbibed, are a thousand years old, and as musty as they are ancient? I little expected in this enlightened and scientific age to find a disciple of Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus. My dear sir, you must begin your studies entirely anew (Shelley 74-75; Dempsey 7:09 – 7:44).

Although Victor claims he was “not disappointed” because he “had long considered those authors useless” – thanks to his father – he still harbors an admiration for them and feels “contempt” for modern scientists (75).

Because why *is* it, exactly, that M. Krempe and Alphonse Frankenstein are so quick to disregard Victor’s interests? A lot of critics take the answer for granted, 8 but really… Why

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8 There have been hundreds of books and articles produced by scholars about *Frankenstein* in the last fifty years, but only a handful come close to addressing this question. Two of the big voices in Mary Shelley scholarship – Anne Mellor and U.C. Knoepfelmacher – presuppose, like most, that Agrippa et. al are, by modern standards, pseudo-scientists (Mellor 90; Knoepfelmacher 317). Similarly, James Rieger famously calls all of the science in *Frankenstein* nothing more than “souped-up alchemy” (xxvi). Most major scholars of *Frankenstein* seem to take for
exactly are Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magnus “sad trash” and “nonsense”? This matters a lot in my reading of the novel, which I see as a sort of “Tale of Two Victors” – one pre-creature and one post. Pre-creature Victor is the one with the interest in the occult… a curious student whose imagination has been kindled and who thinks he’s found something valuable that his teachers have overlooked. Despite their discouragement, he secretly pursues those interests in an effort to prove them wrong, which turns out to work. Combining occult knowledge with modern science, Victor discovers the method to re-animate dead matter, which is an astounding accomplishment in the realm of human knowledge. Victor was right about the potential of those forbidden books all along. The only thing that made the creature into a monster was Victor’s abandonment of it. Which I read as a moment in which he becomes a turn-coat. A traitor to his own convictions, a sell-out who gives in to his intellectual detractors.

So again I ask: what exactly were those detractors saying? What message about science and knowledge did Victor internalize from his father and Krempe that led to the making of a monster? What epistemic gate had been constructed in modern science that Victor worked all

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9 As if to re-emphasize the point that pre-creature Victor’s work is an act of defiance, throughout the momentous scene in which he’s pent up in his room building and animating a human, Shelley creates a scenario in which Victor is constantly at odds with the voice of his father. While in his state of creative frenzy, Victor first recalls his father’s injunction that he must keep up regular correspondence during his time at Ingolstadt (83); later, Victor tells Walton that his father’s letters expressed increasing concern over how he was occupying his time (84). Victor ignores him and presses on in his secret act of creation, but – in my reading – he eventually ends up internalizing the voice of his father (and, by extension, that of Krempe) at the moment he sees the creature come to life. I’ll talk more about this in the next episode, but in most readings of the novel, this is the central tragedy: Victor’s abandonment of the creature. As Smith, Butler, and others have discussed, it is t’s Victor’s sudden change of heart – or mind, rather – that condemns the inherently innocent being to a life of misery and rejection.

10 As discussed in note 4 above, most readers of Frankenstein have interpreted Victor’s discovery less favorably – as a mere act of hubris rather than a scientific breakthrough with boundless positive applications. Alan Rauch acknowledges that the creature “should be considered a remarkable creation,” only Victor’s “ignoring the human qualities that clearly make knowledge effective, particularly nurturing and caring” negates the positive possibilities (228).
those years to furtively tear down, only to end up abandoning it and siding with the Lift Masters after all?

To answer this question for myself,\textsuperscript{11} I reached out to Paul Monod, a History Professor at Middlebury College and author of \textit{Solomon's Secret Arts}, a book about attitudes toward the occult during the Age of Enlightenment. Professor Monod was overseas in Oxford at the time, so our Skype connection here is a little less than optimal, but I asked him why someone like Victor’s father – a magistrate for the government of Geneva in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century – would have called Agrippa “sad trash.”

\textbf{Monod:} Well, it wasn’t taken very seriously by that time. Uh, it was regarded as a product of superstition, and as something that had more to do with the period in which it was written – it had more to say to pre-Reformation society… even though Agrippa was a Protestant probably, we’re not certain of that – and the reputation of Geneva was for a sort of Calvinist rationalism, so it’s not at all surprising that that would be the case […] The image of Geneva is of a very straitlaced rationalistic society, and so I think this is meant to bolster that image in the mind of the reader.

He’s referring, of course, to John Calvin, the puritanical theologian best known for his theory of predestination. Two hundred years before, Calvin had promoted the Protestant Reformation from Geneva, and his brand “rationalism” – or, the belief that reason always trumps emotion – is reflected in his theory that all human wisdom consists of two parts: knowledge of God and knowledge of one’s self. Knowledge of God – and here is the “rational” part – can only be attained through the reading of Scripture and the exercise of one’s reason in interpreting that

\textsuperscript{11}There’s maybe been only one other person who’s taken seriously this question of why Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magnus were \textit{persona non grata} for Victor’s teachers, and that is Samuel Vasbinder – a Ph.D. student in the 70’s who wrote a dissertation titled \textit{Scientific Attitudes in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein}. The project sets out to prove that Mary Shelley knew more about science than most previous critics had given her credit for, and in the process Vasbinder addresses the question of Alphonse Frankenstein’s reaction to his son’s interest in Agrippa. Vasbinder points out that, soon after calling Victor’s interests “sad trash,” Alphonse gives his son a lesson in electricity, using a kite to attract lightning a la Benjamin Franklin. Like others since him, Vasbinder reads this moment as one in which Victor (at least nominally) gives up on those occultists… claims the “lords of [his] imagination” were “overthrown.” And according to Vasbinder, it’s because of his father’s “demonstration of \textit{new} science and its learning” (60, emphasis mine). So, although it’s never explicitly stated, Vasbinder says Alphonse disdains Agrippa simply because his ideas are “old,” as he sets out to prove with the kite. He doesn’t mention Krempe at all.
Scripture (Parker 13, 21). Unlike this text- and reason-centric theory of knowledge, occultists like Agrippa believed that knowledge of God could be attained through secrets embedded in nature itself. Monod talked about this when I asked him about Albertus Magnus… who’s not actually in his book Solomon’s Secret Arts because – as it turns out – he was never really an occultist.\(^\text{12}\)

**Monod:** And, um, those who think that nature holds occult secrets – hidden revelations – come to believe that Albertus was somehow privy to them. In the same way King Solomon was privy to them. I mean, this is the myth of Solomon on which the title of the book is based. The idea that Solomon had this knowledge of all things in the world, and because he had that knowledge, he knew also the hidden things in the world. And the hidden things in the world were secrets put there by God that could raise you to a higher spiritual plane.

So, being thinkers of the occult tradition, Agrippa and Paracelsus believed that nature held secret, divine knowledge that, if humans could find it, would bring them closer God. Or, according to their pious critics, could usurp the divine knowledge of God that humans were never meant to wield. But for a “Calvinist rationalist” like Alphonse Frankenstein, the belief that knowledge could be attained this way would have looked like superstition. Naïve, magical thinking that he didn’t want his son falling for. This debate surrounding the *way we know things* is also what Krempe seems to take up when he calls the work of Agrippa and the like “nonsense” and “exploded systems” (Shelley 74).

But, of course, Victor didn’t rely on mere superstition or magical thinking to gain his knowledge; he combined the old with the new. In my reading, it was never that he wanted to prove that the old way was the right one – just that the rationalist distinction his father and

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\(^{12}\text{As Monod explains, “The reason Albertus Magnus is in [Frankenstein] is because of a fallacy.” Early editions of Magnus’s theological works include as an appendix a “little treatise on alchemy that he was supposed to have written,” but “he never wrote it. It was not by him” (Monod, personal interview). Although Albertus renounced alchemy, people mistook him for an alchemist because of this editorial error until later in the nineteenth century “when they started reading him again” (Monod, personal interview).}
Krempe were making was too simplistic and closed-minded. Sure, Victor came to Ingolstadt devoted to his medieval occult philosophers, but he did delve into the modern sciences with an “ardour” that was “the astonishment” of his fellow students and a “proficiency” that awed his teachers… including Krempe (Shelley 78). Within two years, Victor tells Walton, he had maxed out his teachers’ abilities; by their own admission, he had nothing left to learn from them and so was considering leaving Ingolstadt and going home (Shelley 78-79). What made him decide to stay was the decision to set off on a kind of independent study to answer this question that had continued to nip at his mind. A vestige of his still-lingering admiration of occult philosophy:

Victor: One of the phenomena which had peculiarly attracted my attention was the structure of the human frame, and, indeed, any animal endued with life. Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? (Shelley 79; Dempsey 2:59 – 3:12)

In other words, what makes things alive?

Victor: It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered as a mystery; yet with how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our inquiries (Shelley 79; Dempsey 3:12 – 3:24)

He decides to be brave and break through that careless restraint. Combining his advanced skills in the modern sciences – things like anatomy, chemistry, physics, biology – with the occult belief that such a question can be answered, Victor goes on to fulfill his quest. He proves that modern and occult science aren’t mutually exclusive as his father and Krempe would have him believe. He guns it through that intellectual gate and earns himself a permanent spot in any academic lot he desires.

And then? He gives it all up. But that’s next time on My Gothic Dissertation.

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13As noted by Janelle Schwartz in Worm Work: Recasting Romanticism, there is a “certain mystique” surrounding the methods Victor actually uses to animate his Creature (151); nonetheless, she too regards his methodology to be a combination of old and new – specifically, “a filtering of old philosophies through new theories” (161).
Back to my own dreary morning – or, now *afternoon* – in November. It’s 12:21, I’m second in line, and someone’s leaving.

**Anna:** Okay, so, theoretically, when the gate goes up for this person to leave after they’ve paid, Thomas and I should be able to get in. [pause] Oh no! There’s a faculty member creeping up in the other lane! [pause] Thomas hasn’t pressed the… okay, Thomas is pressing the button. But I think that when these faculty members go in, I won’t be able to go in. Let’s see what happens… Okay, Thomas is going… here *I* go… Two faculty members both pressed the button before me…

**Parking Machine:** Please press the button and take the parking ticket.

**Anna:** *Sweet.*

**Parking Machine:** Please take the parking ticket. Please enter following the guidance.

Up goes the Lift Master, and in I drive to find a place to park after 36 minutes spent in the car behind my own former student. I now have nine more before the beginning my class, which translates to just enough time to find a spot, gather my motley assortment of bags, get inside, drop the motley assortment in my basement office, and dash up to my second-floor classroom.

There will be fifty minutes of discussing *Wuthering Heights*, then an hour back in the basement coaching students on their essays or, alternately, fielding grade complaints about their essays, then another fifty minutes of discussing *Wuthering Heights* with another set of students. Finally, I’ll gather my belongings and head home to keep working on my dissertation.

And after two more days, I’ll be back to do it all again… because I’m chained to this rock for as long as it takes me to finish writing this dissertation. Recording this podcast. It’s kind of the inverse of Prometheus’s liver, actually… after what feels like an eternity behind the gate, my pass keeps materializing just in time, only to disappear for me to remake all over again for the next round. Like this chapter, now complete, but dissipating into the stark realization that, after all this, I have to write another one.
CHAPTER THREE: Frankenstein: or, The Modern Lift Master (part two)

On February 27th, 2018, I’m back – where else – at the entrance to the EPB parking lot.

Parking Machine: Please press the button and take the parking ticket. Please take the parking ticket. Please enter following the guidance.

The lot is much emptier at this hour of the day – 7:30am. Classes haven’t started yet, and Iowa City is still the domain of children being bused to school and grown-ups driving themselves to work. That means no one is coming here yet, to the EPB, and without cars in the lot, you can see the Iowa River separating this side of campus – the east – from the west campus, with its foreboding medical buildings and science labs perched high on the river bank. Between east and west campus, the river glides along carrying big drifts of snow and ice to the south. It’s peaceful. Serene.

I’m here this early to attend a session of Write On – as in, w-r-i-t-e. It’s an early morning block of time set aside in the university’s Writing Center, which is housed on the first floor of EPB. During these hours, graduate students huddle together to work on their dissertations, before the cares of the rest of the day have settled in – things like answering student e-mails, attending meetings, lesson planning. I’m here to interview Dr. Deirdre Egan, the Assistant Director of the Writing Center, about the reasons she started this Write On program – how it’s specifically designed to help graduate students focus on their writing. She greets me at the entrance to the Writing Center and reminds me the interview will have to wait until the session is over. This is protected time of silence for the Write On crew. So for now, I open my laptop, put on my headphones, and start thinking about my own dissertation.

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Welcome back to *My Gothic Dissertation*. In the last episode, we took a strange look at Victor Frankenstein, suggesting that it wasn’t *God* he meant to challenge in creating his infamous Creature, but rather, his own *teachers* – namely, his father Alphonse Frankenstein and one of his professors at Ingolstadt named M. Krempe. We suggested that, from Victor’s perspective, they were being closed-minded authority figures, not nurturing his curiosity and his interests, and instead acting like pedantic pedagogues blocking his access to the ancient philosophy he wanted to study.

But, like Prometheus with Zeus, Victor defied their attempts to discourage him, pressing forward and combining old knowledge with new science in his infamous act of creation. Doing so, he successfully proved his teachers wrong by making a monumental scientific discovery… The ability to create a living, breathing human being using knowledge from the very authors his teachers tried to block his access to. But something happens when that Creature takes its first breath – when the fruit of so much of Victor’s labor finally comes to life. Victor loses his nerve – his hard-headed ability to drown out the voices of those who wanted to discourage him. He steps back and sees his creation through their eyes and feels… *horrified*.

**Victor:** How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? (Shelley 85; Stevens 0:50-1:03)

This change of heart is something that has puzzled scholars for decades, because the text doesn’t give us much to go on. Why is it that Victor turns on his creation and abandons it, leaving it to roam helpless and alone through the German and Swiss wilderness, only to develop a murderous rage as a result of his own misery?
After giving Walton the line about trying to describe how he felt when he first saw his Creature (because, remember, Shelley’s work is framed as Victor telling his tale on board the explorer Robert Walton’s ship) he offers this brief physical description of the Creature – the only one we get in the novel. Spoiler alert: there’s no green skin. No neck bolts.

**Victor:** 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; 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, his shrunken complexion, and straight black lips (85).

Some scholars have interpreted the “yellow skin,” “black hair,” and “black lips” as Mary Shelley’s subtle suggestion that the Creature isn’t white, and what horrifies Victor is its racial Otherness. So, they read Victor’s abandonment of the Creature as Shelley’s commentary on Britain’s ever-expanding empire and its reckless treatment of conquered, non-white people.¹

Since the 1970’s, though, there’s been another intriguing reading from a line of scholars born out of the Women’s Liberation movement and the second wave of feminism. They suggest the reason Victor abandons his creature is that he’s suffering from something akin to post-partum depression.² His child is born after a long, hard period of labor, and after all of that trauma and strife bringing his progeny into the world, he finds himself unable to love it. They point out that, only sixteen months before she started writing *Frankenstein*, a seventeen-year-old Mary Shelley had given birth her own first child, only to have it die in infancy (Mellor xvi). Another was born

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¹ For an overview, see Patrick Brantlinger’s “Race and *Frankenstein,*” *Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein,* 2016.
– William³ – only eleven months after that, and as she penned the novel, she was once again pregnant with her third child at only twenty years of age (Mellor xvi). Not to mention the fact that her own mother – the famous 18th century philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft – had died giving birth to her. For these feminist scholars of the 1970’s and beyond, Frankenstein is a parable about the unspeakable pain and fear of motherhood.

This autobiographical interpretation of the novel as a post-partum myth has really taken off in scholarly circles, and my reading is similar to this one… because based on that physical description it does seem clear that Victor is revolted by his Creature. He finds it hideous. But I think the Creature represents not so much a child as another labor of love that Shelley was engaged in. Writing… which, of course, has a long history of being conflated with childbirth.⁴ But specifically, young Mary Shelley was writing literary work for the first time and with a very specific audience that, like Victor’s, was anxiously expectant and maybe kind of patronizing – her father, the renowned philosopher William Godwin, and her husband, the up-and-coming poet Percy Shelley. As noted by the many Shelley biographers – and Shelley herself – both of these men had long expected her to produce some literary offspring… following in her mother’s footsteps and in their own (Shelley 354, Poovey 121).

Victor was also being watched pretty closely by his own expectant teachers. As Victor tells Walton, back during his time as a student, Krempe wouldn’t let him forget his foolishness in

³Many cite her use of the name “William” for Victor’s beloved youngest brother, killed by the Creature, as further evidence that her novel represents her own painful experiences with motherhood. See for instance Mellor’s chapter “Making a Monster” in Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters, 47.
⁴Mary Shelley famously compares her novel to a child – and to Victor’s Creature – in her introduction to the 1831 text: “And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days” (qtd. in “Appendix G: Introduction [1831],” Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus. (The 1818 Version). 2nd ed. Edited by D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf, Broadview, 1999. 358, emphases mine).
once expressing interest in occult philosophy. Occasional run-ins on campus would inevitably result in some patronizing jeering:

**Victor:** Professor Krempe often asked me, with a sly smile, how Cornelius Agrippa went on? (Shelley 78)

And after this, during the time of his “independent study” – his creation of the Creature – Victor’s father was also kind of surveilling him. Noting the infrequency of Victor’s communication back home, Alphonse began writing letters to inquire about his son’s studies “more particularly than before” (84).

Besides these similar situations of surveillance, another reason I think Victor’s act of creation represents Shelley’s commentary on writing is that there are certain things Victor seems to find more hideous than others about his Creature. First, what follows Victor’s pronunciation about the absurdity of his intention to make the Creature beautiful…

**Victor:** Beautiful! – Great God!

…is this:

**Victor:** His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath. As if this is the explanation for why it’s now preposterous for him to think of his work as beautiful. So, clue number one: the poorly fitting skin.

After this, Victor goes on to describe the Creature’s lustrous black hair and pearly white teeth, but he calls these “luxuriances” – so, they’re actually all right looking. And, pretty effeminate if you think about it. But they become grotesque, Victor says, in comparison to this other part of the Creature’s body – our second clue:
**Victor:** 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.

The eyes. They’re “watery” and “the same colour” as the sockets – which is a “dun white.” And, “dun” here isn’t “d-o-n-e,” it’s “d-u-n” – a word we don’t really use anymore, but it’s used to describe color. The *OED* defines “d-u-n” as “dark, “dusky,” “murky,” and “gloomy.” So the eyes are watery, gloomy, and of the same color as “the sockets in which they were set.” In other words, to Victor, they’re the opposite of bright and vibrant. They seem dull and lifeless. Clearly artificial. *Made.*

And this quality of artificiality, this “made-ness” is something the two clues have in common. The ill-fitting skin, remember, “scarcely covers” Victor’s painstaking “work” underneath – his stitching together of the intricate system of “muscles and arteries.” And the eyes, as I just said, seem lifeless and dull – not the proverbial ‘windows of the soul’ but a signal of their own constructedness. Both of these clues point to the fact that, when Victor looks at his Creature, what he sees is its imperfections, yes, but also its artificiality. Its having been *made*… *by him.* In my reading of why Victor abandons the Creature, it’s that he sees it as an imperfect product – *his* imperfect product – and he panics at the thought of having to show it to his teachers who, historically, have been critical of his independent interests…

**Alphonse:** It is sad trash.

…of which this Creature is the pinnacle. He had taken a big risk in embarking on this secret mission to prove them wrong with his remarkable invention, but when he sees the resulting prototype – functioning but flawed – he’s afraid his father and Krempe will tear it, and him, to pieces... figuratively, of course.

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Back to the Write On session. Two hours go by pretty quickly, as I join forces with the five or so other grad students tapping away at their keyboards and pausing ever so often to gaze into space, thinking. There’s a quiet kind of energy in the room – which, by the way, is a long, rectangular space filled mostly with round café tables, a bank of desktop computers against one wall, quiet but for the laptop tapping and the industrial-sized coffee machine percolating in the middle of the room. Usually, the Writing Center is a busy din of noise – writing tutors’ voices crossing over one another as they consult with students on their essays and applications. But for now, there are no clients, and everyone is channeling their fully caffeinated attention toward their own work. We’re all deep in the world of our own minds – alone together – but there are occasional nods of recognition when our contemplative gazes meet. Like ship captains hailing each other as our boats glide past one another through the early morning fog.

Eventually the quiet spell is broken when the Writing Center opens for business and a tutoring session begins. At this point, I gather up my many things – coat, bag, computer, recording equipment – and shuffle over to talk to Deirdre about why she decided to provide this protected habitat for grad students to work in.

Deirdre: Graduate students were often left […] sort of floundering around wondering how to accomplish this task of writing a dissertation without a whole lot of support […]

Deirdre is originally from Ireland, as you can probably tell by her accent, and she came here in the 1990’s as an exchange student, but she stayed and eventually ended up with a Ph.D. in Gender, Women’s, and Sexuality Studies. Working as Assistant Director of the Writing Center, Deirdre sees dissertating grad students from all walks of academic life.

Deirdre: I think the humanities is particularly difficult, because there are all kinds of strange assumptions about writing that get in the way of writing a dissertation… (laughs) One of them is that, um writing is an isolated and individual project – you go off and you
do it in a cave and you come back out with a, you know, perfectly formed piece of writing.

This being in a cave, this isolation, says Deirdre, can lead to the floundering. Going from being the poised, capable ship captain to the catch of the day, flapping around desperately on the deck. And it’s actually built in to the process of getting a Ph.D. in the humanities – this moment when you’re cut loose and left to your own devices. That’s what Write On was designed to help combat, simply by putting grad students in the presence of one another – even if they aren’t directly interacting. Because without this common ground, Deirdre says, you can easily drift into a very anxious place.

**Deirdre:** There’s kind of a vicious cycle, right? You stop working on your project every day, and you become more distant from your project and ideas are not percolating in your head. You think about going back and picking up your writing and you just feel like panicking, so instead you spend two hours watching Netflix because it’s easier, right? And you don’t have to think about it. It’s assumed that you can forget about that anxiety for a few minutes, and then, you know, it emerges again when you turn off Netflix and realize you just wasted two hours watching *The Crown.* Or whatever!

**Anna:** It gets compounded.

**Deirdre:** It gets compounded, right.

Been there. But besides students writing in isolation, drifting farther and farther from their original ideas, getting lost and anxious, and seeking distraction that leaves them feeling more lost and anxious, there’s another side of this bad writing equation as well. Those who do the reading and commenting. The Alphoneses and Krempes. Because it’s the thought of what they’ll think and say that’s making these students so anxious in the first place, right? I asked Deirdre what she thought about it.

**Deirdre:** I don’t think all advisors are really equipped to provide feedback that is super useful? They have good intentions – I’m not saying they don’t – but I just think they, sometimes they don’t… I think that, um, particularly in the academy, most professors have no training in how to respond to writing, or how to give feedback to writing. They
learn it through the process of peer review, which they do for their – you know, in their field? Often, they are seeing manuscripts that are most polished at this point than they can expect to get from a graduate student, for example.

They really don’t like seeing the stitches, in other words. The ill-fitting skin and lifeless eyes. The evidence of what Deirdre called later in our conversation “a messy process” – which is often, ironically, essential to a polished product.

But since – especially in the humanities – professors advising grad students may not be used to getting bogged down in the muck of someone else’s mind, having more contact instead with only the clean finished products, it can be difficult for them to see the value buried there. So their criticism can seem harsh and confusing to the student who – remember – is already on pretty unsteady ground to begin with. It becomes easier to just try to wade over into the professor’s less murky territory than to try to fish your original idea out of the muck, shine it up and defend it. If you could even find it again, anyway.

**Deirdre:** If you’re not in regular contact with your project, then it’s easy for, um, you to get kind of enticed by other people’s visions of it and to lose sight of your own vision of what that should be. So, you know, maybe you’ve done nothing on it for three months and you’ve suddenly did a month’s worth of work, got some feedback, and now your advisor sees it in a particular light, and… because you haven’t got a really strong vision of what it is, it’s kind of easy to go along with their vision, but you don’t know exactly what their vision is, because maybe they haven’t communicated it perfectly to you, so then you do another little bit and you send it, and that’s not quite what they had in mind, but because you didn’t know what you had in mind… you – there’s all kinds of frustration, right? And people get frustrated with their advisors because they’re like, “They want me to do this thing, and I thought I knew what it was, and it isn’t that.”

Again, been there. Was there so often I had pretty much moved in, actually. Will probably go back several more times before I finish this dissertation.

For now, I thank Deirdre for her time, gather up my belongings, and leave the Writing Center – which, by 10am, is buzzing with activity and conversation. I need to talk to other participants, I think. Others who are in the muck, like me.
Angela: Was the paper I turned in good? No. It was not good. It was an unholy Frankenstein monster of different methodologies that I had sewn together in like the dark of the night because I was trying to do both the thing that I wanted to do and the thing that I suspected that she wanted me to do.

This is Angela Toscano, a fellow Ph.D. student in English, conveniently drawing an analogy between her own work and Victor Frankenstein’s. Angela is a lively, Sicilian-American hand-talker, and she’s in her last semester here at Iowa, finishing up her dissertation before the Grad College’s early summer graduation deadline. Angela and I talk at her kitchen table one afternoon in March, a few weeks before she needs to make her first dissertation deposit. Looking back over her grad career, she reflects on her own sense of anxiety at turning in work for her professors, and how it can feel more like giving them what you think they want, rather than actually producing something original.

Angela: I was trying to meet expectations that weren’t articulated. And that, to me, is like the worst part. Right? Because then you’re just like guessing. You’re in the dark. You’re like, “I don’t know... I’m probably going to get a bad grade on this, so I’m freaking out about this. And maybe I’m really dumb. Maybe I’m not actually a good scholar.”

“Maybe I’m really dumb. Maybe I’m not actually a good scholar.” This kind of work gets personal really quickly. Which is something Angela expressed really well later in the conversation, too, when I asked her if there were ever any times when grad school had made her feel unworthy.

Angela: Um, yes. Let’s see. It’s like, “let me just roll through the rolodex in my mind of these things.” Um... I mean, the whole process of like, dissertating is like designed to make you feel unworthy. […] I was talking about this with someone else – but like, they forget that like, you’re the fucking chapter? You know what I mean? So they’re commenting on the chapter, like, “Oh this isn’t where it needs to be.” But like, all you hear is “I’m not where I need to be.” Right?
Angela wasn’t the only one who talked about how anxiety to meet unclear expectations led her to fundamentally question her identity.

**Lydia:** It was one of the weirdest and most difficult writing experiences that I’ve experienced? That I’ve had here? […] But part of it was, um, perhaps an absence of listening and actually hearing my ideas?

In a conversation with another colleague in the English Ph.D. program – this time, a member of my own cohort, Lydia Maunz-Breese – this same experience emerged. Lydia described an instance when she was writing an essay under the direction of a very particular professor… someone who was trying to offer a lot of support but whose directions were often so difficult for Lydia to understand that they had the opposite effect of support. Lydia would walk away from meetings with this person feeling confused and unsure of herself, which led to panic.

**Lydia:** It somehow always ended up being… moving away from the ideas that I wanted to follow and to pursue, and… sending me off on these kind of rabbit hole tangents that […] It didn’t – I didn’t even – It didn’t make sense to me! I lost the logic of my own paper! And I lost the logic of my own argument! Because it wasn’t something I was actually arguing anymore! I don’t know. It was… it was weird. It was very uncomfortable, um, and… it made me kind of… deeply second guess my ability to generate a coherent anything.

Later, like Angela, she also explicitly stated how such interactions made her feel unworthy not just as a scholar, but as a person:

**Lydia:** That’s like… fundamentally characterizes my experience of being a grad student. *Is* being unworthy. It’s not good enough. It’s *never* good enough. […] That’s the tricky thing. Because the boundaries between that get blurred really insidiously. Where, it’s… “your work isn’t good enough,” but that becomes very much, “you aren’t good enough.” Because… we’re so inextricably bound up in the work that we do!

To find a way through this gauntlet and make space for your ideas – to insist that, even though they may not seem like it, they *are* important – often means facing the scariest villain of all head-on: rejection. And yes, rejection happens all the time in this business… people apply for
academic conferences, academic journals, academic awards, and plenty of times they get rejected from those things. But, like Lydia said, the lines get blurred “really insidiously,” and it starts to feel like personal rejection. Exclusion from the group you want so desperately to be included in to feel secure.

In other words, attaining the ultimate fulfillment – professional validation of your original, innovative ideas – often means pressing against traditions and norms of that profession in ways that feel uncomfortable – even frightening. It means putting yourself at risk of… abandonment.

And this is a fundamental choice that every young scholar has to make: do you follow well-established conventions as a surer way of getting accepted into the academic community? Or do you strike out on a risky venture and put everything at stake – including your professional credibility and even your psychological wellbeing?

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Victor: I am now convinced that [my father] was justified in conceiving that I should not be altogether free from blame. (Shelley 83)

At the crucial moment when Victor faces this decision, he’s isolated in his laboratory, gazing on his messy creation and thinking about the prospect of showing his teachers who’ve been watching him from afar.

Victor: I knew well therefore what would be my father’s feelings. (Shelley 83)

Reflecting on this moment, he tells Walton that he agrees with his father, and finds himself to blame for indulging in his work with too much passion and not enough reason – a.k.a., not enough listening to the voices of authority. But I would argue that, in this moment after the Creature comes to life, Victor listens too much to the voice of authority – or, at least, his
internalized version of it – and he panics. He expects that they’ll reprimand him – even condemn him, maybe… but I’m not entirely convinced they would have, actually, had Victor shown the Creature to Krempe or his father. Sure, they had a lot of strong ideas about what did and didn’t count as knowledge, but they did seem pretty devoted to the advancement of science – which Victor’s creature undeniably represents.

Nevertheless, from past experiences…

Victor: (quoting his father) Sad trash.

…Victor is convinced that they will hate it. And, by extension, him. So, after a few moments of assessing the faults of his creation and trying to figure out what to do, Victor just… leaves. He goes to his room and somehow manages to fall asleep, only to wake and see the Creature standing silently beside to his bed… a pathetic, full-grown toddler looking for comfort after a bad dream. At this point Victor abandons it for a second time, running out into the streets of Ingolstadt and raving around like a mad-man. When he returns home later, his creation is nowhere to be found.

That’s because, just blinking into life, the Creature has stumbled out into the world only to be violently spurned by every terrified person he encounters. After months, years of heart-breaking rejections from the human race he so admires and wants to join, the Creature finally becomes vengeful and turns – yes – into a monster, tracking down members of the Frankenstein family and murdering them to punish his creator. And when the Creature finally finds Victor again, he confronts him about his irresponsible parenting, only to be rejected for a third time when Victor refuses to build him a companion with whom to disappear in peace. When this very reasonable request isn’t granted, the Creature continues to kill his creator’s family and friends one by one, until Victor decides he has to find and destroy this monster he created. Locked in a
battle of wills, Creature and Creator pursue one another all over the European continent and eventually wind up in the North Pole, where Walton finds Victor and brings him aboard his ship.

Like a lot of modern readers, I clearly consider the central tragedy of the novel not to be Victor’s creation of the Creature, but rather, his abandonment of it. Similar to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s conception of the “natural man,” the Creature was seemingly born pure – naïve and benevolent. He wants nothing more than companionship with humans, and he seeks to achieve it through learning – a process of growth and development that his creator outright denies him when he abandons him again and again, determined that he’s inherently bad and unable to be improved through education.

In deciding that the Creature is unworthy of pursuing his educational desires, Victor essentially becomes Lift Master 2.0 – blocking access to the knowledge his son and pupil wants the most. Like Alphonse and Krempe before him, Victor believes he has the authority to decide what his Creature may and may not know – only his neglect is even more egregious, in that it leads to the death of nearly everyone he loves.

It’s a familiar, vicious cycle of abuse. Because, as David Punter reminds us, the Biblical notion of the sins of the father being visited upon the sons is a common feature of the Gothic genre:

Punter: The notion of inheritance has always been interesting in the Gothic, because there’s always the possibility of a very troubled inheritance. Inheritance may never be as simple as you want. With the goods — the things that belonged to your forefathers, your family, there also come the family ghosts […] One term that is often used to think about these things in Gothic fiction is the old Biblical notion of the sins of the fathers – the way in which things which your forefathers may have done — and about which you may

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5 Many critics have made this comparison between the Creature and Rousseau’s “natural man,” including Paul Cantor in Creature and Creator: Myth-making and English Romanticism (Cambridge University Press, 1984) and Anne K. Mellor in Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters (Metheun, 1988). Alan Richardson revises this comparison and argues instead that the Creature is more akin to Rousseau’s depictions of himself in The Confessions and Reveries (see “From Emile to Frankenstein: The Education of Monsters,” in Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832 (Cambridge, 1994; 205-206).
know about or not know about — may be re-visited upon you. So that your quest, in the
Gothic novel, is sometimes to find out, what is it that’s been done in the past that means
that I have to suffer like this in the present? (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdgDoT8LjaM&t=36s, 35:50–36:10; 36:32–37:03)

For the Creature, as for Victor before him, the suffering of the present – their intellectual
abandonment and shaming – is very much a product of their fathers’ sins… which in both cases
turns out to be anxious conformity with authority. Both Alphonse and Victor Frankenstein –
albeit with different degrees of severity – shame their sons out of their pursuits because they
themselves are afraid of the judgment of their peers and superiors. Alphonse, the well-respected
city magistrate, doesn’t want his son reading books out of vogue in Calvinist rationalist Geneva
(Monod). Victor, having won the admiration of his own father and professor, doesn’t want to
disappoint them with his “hideous progeny” – his living creation that he had designed out of a
spirit of rebellious innovation, but that he didn’t think would be impressive enough to those
critical figures.

So continues the cycle of scholarly tradition and intellectual conformity kept in place by
judgment, ridicule, and shame – or at least, the fear of those things.

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If it isn’t clear by now, I’m suggesting that one of the ways grad school feels particularly Gothic
is that this same cycle – going from being the one stuck behind the Lift Master to becoming the
Lift Master one’s self – also seems to be built in. In his 2015 book The Graduate School Mess:
What Caused It and How We Can Fix It, Leonard Cassuto also notes the cyclical nature of
graduate programs – how resistant to change they are because they tend to like doing things how
they’ve always been done.

Cassuto: Graduate school is such a conservative institution. Academia is very
conservative with a small c, but graduate school even more conservative, I think, than the
university at large.
Here he is talking specifically about the conservatism of the dissertation back in 2012, on a TV show called *Higher Education Today*, produced at the University of the District of Columbia:

**Cassuto:** The dissertation as we know it started in German universities in the early 19th century, and the United States imported that model after the Civil War, where it has continued more or less in the same form for over a century.

What this form actually looks like is a proto-monograph – or, the makings of a book dedicated to one specialized subject, such as Manifest Destiny in nineteenth-century American fiction. Or “gendered pathology in modernist literature.” Or “monstrosity on the Renaissance stage.” (These are all, by the way, topics of real dissertations that were published to ProQuest – an online dissertation database – in 2016.)

Graduate students spend years researching and writing these tomes – which, as I’ve said elsewhere, usually clock in around two or three hundred pages – because they’re supposed to be the makings of what Sidonie Smith refers to as the “tenure book” (Smith 130). A former president of the Modern Language Association and author of the recent *Manifesto for the Humanities*, Smith explains that dissertations are part of new Ph.D.s’ job applications because hiring committees want to see how likely it is that, within six years of being hired, these job candidates will be able to get their work published at respected, academic university presses in order to receive tenure (Smith 130). The old “publish or perish” maxim. Which, if you think about it, is a pretty Gothic configuration, considering the genre’s preoccupation with death.

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6 Melton, Howard Gene, II. *Fellow travelers: Mobility, male friendships, and the whitening of U.S. national space in nineteenth-century American literature*. Proquest Dissertations Publishing.


8 Wright, Kristen Danielle. *A Monster Turned to Manly Shape*”: Monstrosity on the Renaissance Stage. Proquest Dissertations Publishing.

9 David Punter contends, for example, that the graveyard poets did much to lay the groundwork for the Gothic, especially in their intense concern with the psychological struggles of a single speaker’s fixation on the limits of human knowledge (36-37).
This Gothic, “do this or die” ultimatum has been lurking in our professional lingo for a long time… and, as it turns out, a lot of potential job candidates perish before even having the chance to publish. That’s because of the high attrition rates for humanities Ph.D.’s that I mentioned in the first chapter. Here’s Leonard Cassuto talking about what he uncovered about attrition in researching his book *The Graduate School Mess*:

**Cassuto:** We are harboring a lot of assumptions that structure what it is that we do that result in these workplace conditions that are – it’s not just disreputable, it’s absurd. We’re running a workplace where, first of all, there’s 50% attrition. And, out of that 50% attrition, half of the fifty leave early, which is fine. Because graduate school is a strong flavor, and it’s not for everybody. (Cassuto, “Leonard,” 6:10 – 6:39)

Leaving early is fine, says Cassuto, because it’s a learning experience. Students can still walk away with a Master’s degree and go find something else to do that’s more to their taste. But the other half of those who leave… they’re the real victims of the story.

**Cassuto:** But the other half of the people who don’t complete – 25% of that first hundred – they are leaving in the latter part of their program, after years of abject suffering in the plain sight of their peers and their teachers. (Cassuto, “Leonard,” 6:51 – 7:12)

Roughly a quarter of all who enter Ph.D. programs in the humanities make it to the point of writing a dissertation only to decide to give up and walk away – “after years of abject suffering in plain sight,” as Cassuto says. They’re abandoning their creatures – their dissertations – because they just can’t get them to conform into the acceptable models of the profession. And they too are abandoned by the profession itself… the one they’ve spent years trying to enter.

And in our current climate of anxiety about the continued existence of humanities programs, the fear of scholarly “perishing” is intensified, which leads to more conformity, more panic and shame directed toward attempts at innovation… more “conservatism” with a little c as Cassuto would say. Graduate students and their faculty advisors are trying to make sure
dissertations are setting them up in the best way for one of those few tenure-track jobs available… and the result, according to Kevin Birmingham, is a lot of boring scholarly writing.

**Birmingham:** The biggest problem with the labor market is that it’s making people risk-averse, and scholarship is not supposed to be risk-averse. It’s supposed to be risky, it’s supposed to be original, it’s supposed to strike out into new directions.

It’s *supposed* to do what Victor Frankenstein attempts to do, in other words. Push the limits of a discipline. And Kevin Birmingham knows about taking risks. A graduate of the English program at Harvard, Birmingham went on to write a brilliant book about James Joyce, called *The Most Dangerous Game*, which won the prestigious Truman Capote award for literary criticism back in 2016. As it happens, that award is administered by the Writers’ Workshop right here at the University of Iowa, and when Birmingham came to campus, he gave a speech titled “The Great Shame of Our Profession” that absolutely shocked and blew everyone away. It was later printed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, where it went viral.

He was nice enough to talk to me about a year afterwards, which is when he talked about scholarship needing to be risky. And so, in “scaring people” out of doing innovative scholarship, he says, the academic job market for humanities Ph.D.’s is, in a sense, defeating the purpose of the profession.

**Birmingham:** And so what we have, basically, is a professoriate coming of age that is not risky. And instead of being risky, what they’re good at doing is gaming the system. And… gaming the system is not what the academy should be about. And then, these professors get upset when they find that their students are good at gaming the system instead of being risky, instead of striking out on their own, instead of doing the sort of intellectually challenging and surprising things that we want them to do. They’re copying their professors. And, uh, so the more we can have younger scholars who advance to become senior scholars who are doing risky work, the better.

Later, I asked Birmingham if he would elaborate on exactly what he meant by “gaming the system,” and here is what he said: “The old-fashioned enlightenment ideal of research is that
scholars investigate underexamined or misunderstood subjects in order to correct our errors or tell us why we’ve all missed something important. The goal is to serve humanity by better understanding the nature of our world. Gaming the system is serving your own career by better understanding the whims of our profession. Every profession has its flaws and its careerism, but the academy is particularly bad at keeping it in check. And while careerism is usually ancillary to the work that careerists do, it’s foundational in the academy—it determines the work that scholars do” (Birmingham, e-mail correspondence). In other words, Ph.D.’s are frequently walking away with more expertise in “How to Get Ahead in Academia” than in actual academic work – more focused on pleasing the Lift Masters out there than on the loftier goal of serving the good of humanity. So once again, grad students are limiting their own potential – burying their innovative ideas and reassuring themselves that they can get to them once they’ve achieved tenure… a security net that less than half of them will actually get (Colander and Zhuo 139). In 12 years or so (Smith 147).

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So what can bring an end to this vicious cycle of intellectual and creative conservatism? In Frankenstein, it would have all been different if Victor had just had the courage to show his teachers what he’d made. To follow through with innovation by actually publicizing it instead of hiding behind his fear of ridicule. What does this mean for the real world of graduate education in the humanities?

Maybe something like what happened to Virginia Crisco while she was earning her Ph.D. in English just next door at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Crisco, who’s now an Associate

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10 In her Manifesto, Sidonie Smith also discusses the current atmosphere in the academic humanities as one that intensifies “professional norms” and makes it more difficult to “[break] through normative expectations of an academic humanist” (121).

11 Paul Schmid also laments the effects of the job market on graduate education in “A Vocation/Avocation,” his essay for the special, graduate-oriented issue of Pedagogy (Jan 2015)
Professor of English at Fresno State University, had this extraordinary experience during her graduate program, which was basically that her graduate professors allowed her and her peers to take part in designing their own curriculum. They wrote about the experience in an article published in 2003 in the scholarly periodical called *Pedagogy* out of Duke University. The article, “Graduate Education As Education” is subtitled “The Pedagogical Arts of Institutional Critique,” and it advocates for more a more collaborative style of research and writing in the humanities – not just between the graduate students themselves, but between grad students and their professors.

Which is exactly what happened in the co-authoring of this article: two professors (Chris Gallagher and Deborah Minter) teamed up with the students in Gallagher’s graduate seminar to evaluate the “Intro to Grad Studies” course in their department. What they determined is that the course was lacking in its preparation of grad students for the actual work of grad studies, and so they worked together to create another course that would better serve their needs. Crisco was one of the students who took part in this collaborative curricular design, and I talked to her about it via Skype one afternoon in late April.

*Crisco:* Ya know, honestly, that class was really formative in my professional life, because, number one, it fore-fronted the idea of institutional critique and the importance of that? And having institutional literacy.

By “institutional literacy,” she means the way that change happens at an institutional level. And for her, one of the most important ways of doing that is through curricular design – the decisions about what students study and why.

*Crisco:* That’s one of the ways that particularly professors have a lot of power. We have power over curriculum; we articulate what the curriculum does.
So to invite graduate students to the curriculum party is to share with them a little bit of that power – to collapse the hierarchy that usually exists between faculty and students that can be stilted to innovation. And maybe one reason there isn’t more incentive to do what Crisco’s professors did – which is pay close attention to grad students’ needs and give them a voice in the process – is that, at the institutional level, such moves aren’t really valued. There’s no reward for doing this kind of work.

*Crisco:* Um, it’s also something that is very time consuming and often doesn’t always count for tenure and promotion and those kinds of things? And so it’s also one of the ways that we become, um… ya know, sort of disenfranchised also. Because there isn’t – even though it’s one of the ways we have power, it’s also not valued as far as one of the ways that we spend our time.

But just because the institution doesn’t reward people for doing it, she says, that doesn’t mean it isn’t important. She reiterated that, in fact, it’s one of the more significant forms of power professors have in their institutions, and because of that – if graduate students are going to be properly trained to wield that power one day – such training should start now.

*Crisco:* We need to give graduate students the opportunities to be members of the discipline. And to help them to practice the reading, writing, and researching strategies that members of the discipline do, and give them opportunities that are authentic – or as authentic as possible – in order to engage in the kinds of literacy practices that we do as scholars in the field. […] I feel like that’s the way that we make, um, education meaningful? That students have agency in their learning? That we teach them strategies that are relevant?

Another, perhaps more basic, way I might describe what Crisco experienced as a graduate student and now advocates for – and this is fundamental to what we do, as humanists – is to treat graduate students like they’re humans.

*Angela:* I think there’s like a way in which, like, professors are trained to not see graduate students as people? You know? And I think there are ways that graduate students, like, perform that. Like, we don’t talk about our personal lives. We don’t talk
about our mental health struggles. Because we fear we’re going to get punished if we mention those things. […] Like it’s *unprofessional*. Right?

**Lydia:** This sounds horrible, but […] I feel… in a lot of my interactions with people in academic circles… it seems as though people have become so… they’ve lived in an intellectual world for so long, it’s become an overly intellectualized kind of atmosphere that forgets […] people *have* real things going on. People *are* real people! We’re humans! We have feelings! We have hearts and we have emotions! And we have – we’re not just thinking machines.

Allowing graduate students the opportunity to have a say in their own curriculum instead of relying on the dicta handed down by those above them – it’s a way of recognizing and actively working *against* the power hierarchies that make students feel dehumanized. It’s that feeling, I would argue, that leads – among other things – to their anxiety about writing, our most basic form of participation in the scholarly community.

If masters were more invested in *lifting* rather than *not lifting* the intellectual, institutional, and pedagogical gates that keep graduate students mystified and powerless, maybe more would make it through successfully. Maybe they would also not go on to become Lift Masters 2.0 like Victor, who literally did not treat his intellectual charge like a human. Recognizing grad students’ humanity and giving them voice is not just beneficial for *them*. It’s a way to break the cycle.

**Angela:** I even see it with graduate students, like the way they talk about *their* students. So, I think it’s like really like a vicious cycle. Where you’re like – like, there’s no reason to be angry at like your eighteen-year-old student who can’t write a thesis statement. Like, they’re not doing it to like *thwart* you… they’re just, they just don’t know how!

Because yes, even though grad students *do* struggle against our shadowy Lift Masters, we often end up becoming them ourselves, like Victor. But more on that in the next chapter of *My Gothic Dissertation*. 

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Welcome back to My Gothic Dissertation. Up until now, we’ve journeyed through the Grad School Gothic from the perspective of the innocent, down-trodden protagonists. We’ve seen our heroes trapped in invalidating cycles of approval-seeking and self-doubt, stuck behind Lift Masters who stifled their curiosity and threatened to extinguish their imaginations, and rendered voiceless by the fear of facing disapproval and rejection. Today, we’re going to flip the script. No longer bemoaning the abuses of terrifying teachers, we’re taking a look at the ways students can be monstrous…

Ian: “Professor Faith, in my opinion, is one of the worst professors I have had since being at Iowa.”

If you’ve ever seen ABC’s late night show Jimmy Kimmel Live!, you’re probably familiar with the segment “Celebrities Read Mean Tweets.” It’s a recurring bit where guests on the show take a moment to read aloud some of the nasty things people have said about them on Twitter.

John Krasinski: Can Tweets even be mean? Oh – “Your face is so stupid. I hate you, John Krasinski.”

This is, of course, John Krasinski, who then peers off into the distance, bottom lip protruding, before gazing straight into the camera as if to say, “What did I do to deserve this?” Of course, it’s a staged reaction—and one meant to underscore the absurdity of the baseless vitriol we’ve come to expect from internet trolls—but still, it reminds me a little of what it feels like to be a college teacher doing what, for many, is one of the most dreaded parts of their job. Reading student evaluations at the end of the semester.

Rachel: “You should choose a single teaching style to stick to.”

Of course, not all evaluations are mean, but the ones that are can really sting.
Carl: “I feel that, if Carl has the ability to grade my work, he should also have the ability to teach me how to do my work better. Carl failed to teach me anything slightly helpful, so not only was this class a waste of money, but a waste of time.”

Student evaluations have been a common practice in college classrooms for almost a century now,¹ and they do have some benefits, in theory. Professors can learn what works for student learning and what doesn’t. Students can hold apathetic or abusive teachers accountable. Departments and administrations can have a record of how their faculty is perceived by students. But often—as is the case with celebrity Twitter pages—they can become a place for people to vent their anger at someone. Only with teaching evaluations, it’s a lot more personal, because the anger comes from actual, real-life interactions with a person who, for three months, has (usually) tried their best to do their job.

Brady: “I am writing this mid-semester because he is such a bad professor.”

Rachel: “She seemed almost upset if someone did not tie the history of food with women being oppressed.”

Carl: “Oftentimes it seemed as if Carl was confused by even the simplest of questions.”

Brady: “It’s terrible that some graduate student gets to ruin my future.”

Torie: “All of her reading assignments were pointless.”

Brady: “Highly suggest choosing someone else if at all possible.”

The way I see it, Jimmy Kimmel’s bit is sly commentary on America’s paradoxical obsession with and disdain for celebrities… When we see them read these inordinately mean messages, we are supposed to recognize both our sense of entitlement to the intimate details of these people’s lives and our perceived right to distantly, dehumanizingly attack them. But, because Tweeting

¹ According to Susanna Calkins and Mariana Micari, student evaluations were first used in the college classroom in the late 1920’s. See “Less-Than-Perfect Judges: Evaluating Student Evaluations,” Thought & Action (Fall 2010), p. 7.
nasty things to celebrities is so absurd, it’s easy to laugh at. And laugh off. But that’s not always the case for mean student evals.

**Carl:** Yeah. I mean, like, even now, reading that out loud, it just like makes your gut kind of twist. […] It’s like, this is actually a real observation that I can’t contest with. It’s not a subjective thing. It’s like, I did do that. And I… am sorry that like, I failed in that moment.

Teaching is an incredibly vulnerable act. It usually means standing in front of a room with twenty to thirty sets of eyes watching your every move, forty to sixty ears hanging onto your every word. That is, if you’re lucky enough to hold your students’ attention—the difficulty of which is abundantly clear to the teacher facing a sea of blank faces.

When you’re failing at teaching, you know it. So hearing your students enumerate your failings back to you in excruciating detail is painful. Here’s the Romanticist from my own committee talking about this kind of evaluation, which she says she dreads the most:

**Judith:** It’s not so much that they are really mean – I think some people really have your number. And they do notice the things that you know are not very strong about your teaching. So, I have an anxiety about mastery […] I don’t get that kind of comment very often, but comments that say, like, that make me feel that anxiety about just sort of like not really being prepared enough to teach the class.

There’s been a lot said about how problematic teaching evaluations are—how they often discriminate against instructors from marginalized groups, how they position students as consumers and teachers as commodities, how they’re not even all that good at measuring what

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they’re supposed to measure, which is teaching effectiveness. It’s well covered territory, so I’m not going to go there right now. My point is simply to show some empathy, because I’ve had my fair share of mean evals, too…

Anna: In all lowercase, “very boring class.”

And after identifying with the perspective of the critical student for the past five episodes—one might even say writing one giant mean eval of Ph.D. training as a whole—I just want to acknowledge that college professors are often doing their best, and they can be on the receiving end of much undeserved abuse.

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Having to face a record of your own shortcomings when you’re already in a vulnerable position is something that also happens to Lucy Snowe, the protagonist of the next Gothic novel we’ll examine—Charlotte Brontë’s Villette. We’ll get into an overview of the novel later, but for now, I want to focus in on one particular scene in which Lucy Snowe receives her own mean eval.

It happens only weeks after she’s begun teaching English at the Pensionnat de Demoiselles, a private school for French-speaking girls in the heart of Villette, a fictionalized version of Brussels. Lost deep in thought as she paces “l’allée defendue,” an isolated corner of the school’s garden which is one of her favorite haunts, Lucy is suddenly jolted from her loneliness by a box that drops at her feet from the window above. Thinking it’s for her, she opens it, finding a bouquet of violets and a letter. But when she begins to read the letter, she realizes it’s not for her, and in fact, it’s talking about her… in pretty unflattering terms. First, the mysterious writer thanks the intended recipient for keeping a recent liaison with him—a liaison

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4 Again, see Calkins and Micari.
to which Lucy herself apparently posed an obstruction. Here’s Lucy, as the narrator, reading the contents of the letter:

**Lucy Snowe:** “you seemed to think the enterprise beset with such danger—the hour so untimely, the alley so strictly secluded—often, you said, haunted by that dragon, the English teacher—” (127; 4:19:50 – 4:20:00)

“That dragon the English teacher” being, of course, Lucy herself. The writer then goes on to describe her as:

**Lucy Snowe:** “une veritable bégueule Britannique á ce que vous dites—espéce de monster, brisque et rude comme un vieux caporal de grenadiers, et reveche comme une religieuse’ (the reader will excuse my modesty in allowing this flattering sketch of my amiable self to retain the slight veil of the original tongue).” (127; 4:20:00 – 4:20:19)

The editors of *The Modern Library* edition are less modest. Apparently the author of the letter calls Lucy “a veritable British prude [...] a type of monster, brusque and rude like an old grenadier corporal, and surly like a nun” (579). But remember, he’s only repeating what his unnamed beloved—a student at the school—first said to him. What Lucy stumbles upon, then, is essentially a mean eval—albeit one filtered through the pen of her student’s secret suitor. And although she describes it with sarcasm, calling it a “flattering sketch of [her] amiable self,” her reluctance to translate it—even many years later as she narrates the novel—suggests that it did sting. And, as I mentioned earlier, she’s already in a vulnerable position when she reads it.

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5 While it’s unclear exactly how many years have passed between the events that transpire in *Villette* and Lucy Snowe’s narration of them, the text does offer a few clues. First, when Lucy and the Brettons are reunited at the beginning of Volume Two during her convalescence at La Terrasse, she reveals that she is 24 years old: “Ten years ago I bade them good-bye; since my fourteenth year they and I had never met” (202). At this point, Lucy has been in Villette for approximately eight months: we know she arrived at the Pensionnat on March 3 because her journey began on March 1 and lasted two days (52-65), and at the time of her falling ill, it is the end of autumnal break, which spans from early September to late October (179). Since we know she was employed at the Pensionnat for a total of eighteen months (569), another ten months will pass before she begins teaching at the Faubourg Clotilde, when she is likely 25 years old. From her comments on the children of Paulina and Graham Bretton, who marry around the time Lucy is 25, it seems that at least 20 to 25 years have passed since the events that conclude her narrative. Wrapping up Paulina and Graham’s story at the end of the chapter titled “Sunshine,” she reveals that they have had several children who seem to be adults themselves at the time of her writing: “Dr. Bretton saw himself live again in a son who inherited his looks and his disposition; he had stately daughters, too” (507). So, it seems that Lucy Snowe is likely between 45 and 50 at the time of her narration of *Villette*. 

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The entire novel of *Villette*, in fact, can be read as a study of its heroine’s vulnerability—her susceptibility to danger or injury—which makes it fit easily into the Female Gothic tradition. When the novel opens, adolescent Lucy is staying with her godmother, Mrs. Louisa Bretton, because there seems to be some undisclosed distress in her own home. Sure enough, after Lucy returns to her family, she undergoes eight troubled years that the narration skips over entirely, picking up with a now-orphaned Lucy in her late teens, hinting only cryptically at the trauma she experienced. Under the sway of some unknown force, Lucy compels herself first to London, then across the Atlantic to Villette, where she serendipitously finds employment as a nursery maid for Madame Beck, the proprietor of the Pensionnat. The rest of the novel details Lucy’s internal struggle—or, one might say, educational journey—to reconcile her fierce, proud independence and her intense longing for intimate connection… a connection she finally finds with the charismatic but fiery professor M. Paul Emanuel, only to realize later that self-interested authority figures in his life were attempting to wrench them apart all along. In the end, those self-interested agents win out. M. Paul dies in a shipwreck on his way back from a transatlantic errand he conducted for them, and Lucy lives the rest of her life alone, teaching in the school he had purchased for her before leaving.

In this novel, the interfering taskmasters come mostly in the form of educational figures, because in *Villette* we see the educational themes that Sherry Truffin writes about in *The Schoolhouse Gothic* rise to the surface of a Female Gothic text for the first time. For one thing, *Villette* takes place almost entirely in a school—the aforementioned Pensionnat run by Madame Beck. Critics have widely acknowledged this institution to be a fictionalized version of the

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6 According to Gary Kelly in his intro to the Pickering and Chatto collection *Varieties of Female Gothic*, a defining feature of the Female Gothic genre is the heroine whose “subjective merit […] remains at odds with her or his social identity and status,” leading to a tension between the treatment readers believe she deserves and the treatment she actually receives from other characters in the novel. In other words, her vulnerability (xx).
Brussels boarding school Brontë herself attended and eventually taught in (like Lucy herself) between 1842 and 1844. So, while it leans much more toward realism than *Udolfo* or *Frankenstein*, *Villette* is still heavily informed by the Gothic genre⁷…for instance, Brontë builds a Gothic mythology around the Pensionnat. Formerly a convent, apparently, its halls are haunted by the story of a former nun who was murdered there for her indiscretions; school legend has it that she’s even buried beneath a withered old pear tree in the courtyard. Brontë plays with the reader by having Lucy every now and then spot the ghostly figure of a nun silently gliding through the dark corners she frequents… though, in the style of Ann Radcliffe, it always turns out the nun is not a supernatural specter, and there is indeed a perfectly logical explanation for its presence.

Besides the setting and the explained supernatural in *Villette*, though, Brontë continues in the vein of Radcliffe and Shelley by portraying a powerless Gothic heroine, ever subject to the whims of the more authoritative people around her. And her powerlessness is only exacerbated when she becomes a teacher: first, as Lucy tells us, Madame Beck all but forces her to replace her former English professor.

Lucy Snowe: She, without more ado, made me relinquish thimble and needle; my hand was taken into hers, and I was conducted downstairs […] I was flushed, and tremulous from head to foot: tell it not in Gath, I believe I was crying. (87; 2:54:57 – 2:55:05, 2:55:14 – 2:55:21)

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Madame Beck seems almost disgusted by Lucy’s reticence, unmoved by her legitimate protest that she has only a tenuous grasp of French, which of course is the language she’ll need to speak in order to instruct her students. And the students themselves, as Madame Beck well knows, are a difficult group that promise to challenge Lucy’s autonomy as well. As the headmistress asserts in the hallway shortly before issuing Lucy through the classroom doors:

**Madame Beck:** “But let me tell you these are not quiet, decorous English girls you are going to encounter. Ce sont les Labassecourriennes, rondes, franches, brusques, et tant soit peu rebelles.” (88; 2:57:32 – 2:57:42)

That is, “straightforward, frank, brusque, and a little rebellious.”

**Madame Beck:** “They always throw over timid teachers.” (88; 2:58:02 – 2:58:05)

In this text, which sympathizes with the perspective of the teacher, the *students* are villains.

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**Lulu:** My heart rate is escalating because we’re getting close to the classroom where my students abused me last Wednesday.

This is Lulu, a first-year grad student in Iowa’s Nonfiction Writing Program. One Saturday, when the English-Philosophy Building was unoccupied except for a few timid high schoolers participating in a debate competition, we paid a visit to the room where she teaches Rhetoric two days a week.

**Lulu:** I’m glad—I’m actually glad to be back here right now? Because… it’s preparing me to come back on Monday and face these students.

It’s a course that grad students often teach to earn their tuition and stipend, and that undergrad students are required to take (often kicking and screaming) to earn general education credit.

**Lulu:** So I… I… started teaching in this room, I think, on January 23rd? I want to say? Or 4th? […] Today is March 3rd.
Lulu, like Lucy Snowe, is new to teaching. She’s only just out of college herself, and like the “demoiselles” at Madame Beck’s Pensionnat, the students in this particular class have been... difficult.

**Lulu:** Yeah. Wednesday was, uh, *horrific.* [...] So... they are working on speeches right now? [...] Um... and... Wednesday was our speech workshop day. So they all had to come in with a hard copy of a draft of their speech. So that they could pair up and share those speeches with a partner. And... from the beginning, this was destined to fail. Because, despite giving them guided, in-class writing time on Monday? Half of them did not come with a speech draft.

Lulu was at a loss, she says. Her entire lesson plan depended on students having done what she had assigned for homework. And when Lulu pointed out that they hadn’t done what she had asked, things got worse.

**Lulu:** And then... began... like, not quite yelling? But... almost yelling? That I had *definitely* told them *not* to bring a hard copy. And that... I had tricked them, and... they didn’t understand why I hadn’t *told* them to bring a hard copy... meanwhile, I have five or six excellent students who are sitting there with their notecards or their printed out draft ready to workshop.

One student in particular, Lulu says, started escalating the situation even more than the others. She’d been disruptive all semester and, by the time Lulu and I spoke about it, she’d effectively failed the class because of absences. But that day, says Lulu, she was making her presence *very* known.

**Lulu:** Had like, a strange meltdown. And was very hostile and disrespectful, and she, um... wouldn’t exchange her speech draft. Wouldn’t acknowledge me speaking to her. Um, was distracting students in other groups, and then everything broke down completely.

This wasn’t the only difficult person in the room, though. *Unlike* Lucy Snowe, Lulu’s class was almost entirely men, and men only 2-3 years younger than she was at the time.

**Lulu:** Um, yeah. So, I also had a student near to the beginning *take a picture* of me. During the class. And the flash went off. [...] I feel like being young and female and
teaching students that aren’t much younger than me? Especially in a class of mostly male students like this one? I run the risk—if I try enforcing any kind of discipline? Of like, completely losing respect. If my… if putting my foot down doesn’t work for whatever reason.

As it turns out, there’s a scholarly term for what Lulu had been experiencing: academic incivility.

**Kristen:** Yeah. So academic incivility is any action—whether it’s taken by students or faculty—um, that is disruptive and interferes with the learning environment and the learning community. Essentially it refers to behaviors that violate the mutual respect between students and faculty.

This is Kristen Knepp, a Clinical Psychologist and former resident at the Association of College and University Educators. Kristen earned her Ph.D. in Psychology from Virginia Tech, where she conducted research and published an article on academic incivility. It’s a concept she came to through her experience teaching a weekly “recitation session” of a large Intro to Psych lecture:

**Kristen:** Probably about 30 to 40 students instead of 500 […] So, um, when I was a graduate student and I was teaching, I did encounter incivility from my undergraduate students. […] And, ya know, I did have kind of the two strikes against me that we talked about before. I was young and female […] and I think that I took that choice to delve into the research because it was validating. It was kind of like, “Okay, academic incivility. This is a thing. It’s real, it exists. It’s not just me.” Uh, and it just gave me this sense of validation. […] So it made me feel like I wasn’t alone.

Kristen and the other researchers around the world who study academic incivility generally concur that it comes in some common forms—things that sound a lot like what Lulu experienced…

**Kristen:** Sleeping in class or, um, disapproving groans or sighs during the lecture, acting bored or disinterested in the lecture, um, perhaps not even attending class is another one that is seen a lot? Especially in, um, courses that are required, or um, general education requirements […] Uh, any challenges to the instructor’s knowledge or credibility um, might be perceived as an uncivil behavior, and even dominating class discussion?
Kristen rightly points out that, to an extent, incivility is in the eye of the beholder… some instructors may hardly notice these things, but for others, it can be highly upsetting. But some of the more severe forms of incivility would seem harder to ignore:

**Kristen:** Stalking, uh, whether that’s in person or electronically, intimidation, um, complaints to a professor’s supervisors like the department chair or the dean that are unjustified, or… perhaps unwarranted negative feedback on an instructor’s teaching evaluation at the end of the term.

*Hmm.* And, just like in the research on student evaluations, it turns out women and people of color are more likely to experience incivility from their students. One potential reason for this, Kristen says, is something called…

**Kristen:** “The professorial stereotype.” Which is, even modern-day college students […] seem to have this stereotype in their heads of what a college professor (quote unquote) “should” look like. And typically, they envision a more mature, older white male. Uh, with a deep voice and a commanding presence in the classroom. And when they don’t encounter that in their own courses, uh, they […] may be more likely to turn that behavior outward and perhaps act in an uncivil manner, so.

**Lulu:** These students… are looking for weakness in us as grad students when we get up in front of them. Not every group? But… definitely this group.

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Back to Lucy Snowe. Still standing outside the door of the classroom, Madame Beck presents a challenge to her young employee:

**Madame Beck:** “Dites donc […] vous sentez vous réellement trop faible?” (87, 2:55:52 – 2:55:58)

“Do you really think you’re that weak?” Lucy feels something shift within her, and she’s overcome by that fierce pride I mentioned earlier.

**Lucy Snowe:** “En evant.” (88; 2:57:00 – 2:57:02)
“Let’s go.” Madame Beck proceeds to march through a stern catechism, rallying her new soldier for battle like a general. “Are you too over-excited to teach?” she asks first. “I am no more excited than this stone,” Lucy says, tapping her toe on the flag beneath her feet (Brontë 88).

“Others haven’t made it,” says Madame Beck. “These girls are harsh.” Lucy replies to each new point with determination, until finally Madame Beck issues her final caution:

**Madame Beck:** “You will not expect aid from me, or from anyone […] That would at once set you down as incompetent for your office.” (88; 2:58:42 – 2:58:49)

To which Lucy responds by silently opening the classroom door, issuing the headmistress in ahead of her, and then taking her place at the front of the room. As Madame Beck introduces her as the new teacher, Lucy surveys the class. She notes that they seem “turbulent,” “unmanageable,” “robust, riotous, [and] demonstrative” (Brontë 89). They’re not much younger than she is, on the whole, and several of them are from aristocratic families. As it turns out, these “titled belles,” as she calls them, give her the most trouble:

**Lucy Snowe:** They knew they had succeeded in expelling obnoxious teachers before now; they knew that madame would at any time throw overboard a professeur or maitresse who became unpopular with the school […] Looking at “Miss Snowe” they promised themselves an easy victory” (89; 3:00:54 – 3:01:17).

Leading the charge, “Mesdemoiselles Blanche, Virginie, and Angélique” start to whisper as Lucy begins giving instruction. Soon the whispers turn to murmurs, then they’re laughing out loud… perhaps the most insecure scenario for any teacher to be in, much less one on her first day.

**Lulu:** It’s so hard to have a class, and you know they’re laughing at you, but you don’t know why, and you can’t call them out for it?

For Lucy Snowe, it becomes a “growing revolt of sixty against one,” and since her “command of French [is] so limited,” there’s not much she can do about it (Brontë 90). At least, not verbally.
Because here is where things start to take a turn. Up until this point, it’s easy to empathize with Lucy’s vulnerability as a new teacher. She’s already lived a hard enough life. She’s lonely, she’s far from home—not that she has any loved ones left back in England to make it a home… She’s young, she’s inexperienced, and she’s surrounded by people who seem to want her to fail. Plus, she doesn’t even speak the language. When this class inevitably turns against her, we feel for her powerlessness. And, as Madame Beck warned her, she can’t even ask anyone else for help.

But the way she reacts to this difficult scenario is less easy to empathize with. The only asset she does have is her superior knowledge of English—the language she’s supposed to be teaching to the “wild herd” (Brontë 90). It’s a tiny scrap of power, and she immediately uses it to assert her authority.

**Lucy Snowe:** All I could now do was to walk up to Blanche—Mademoiselle de Melcy, a young baronne—the eldest, tallest, handsomest, and most vicious—stand before her desk, take from under her hand her exercise-book, remount the estrade, deliberately read the composition, which I found very stupid, and as deliberately, and in the face of the whole school, tear the blotted page in two (90; 3:02:39 – 3:03:03).

She resorts to using humiliation—or, one might say, emotional abuse—as a means of behavior management. And soon, she uses physical abuse as well. Because, although humiliating Blanche had almost succeeded in entirely checking the mutiny, there was still one persistent student:

**Lucy Snowe:** One girl alone, quite in the background, persevered in the riot with undiminished energy […] I noted that she sat close by a little door, which door, I was well aware, opened into a small closet where books were kept […] In an instant, and with sharpness, I had turned on her. In another instant she occupied the closet, the door was shut, and the key in my pocket (91; 3:03:10 – 3:03:13, 3:03:27 – 3:03:33, 3:03:59 – 3:04:08).

In probably the most famous scene of *Villette*, Lucy forces a student into the closet and locks her in, in front of everyone. After this, she’s won the awe and respect of the rest of the students, but—as Lucy herself tells us—they still remain unmotivated, low-achieving learners.
Lucy Snowe: Severe or continuous mental application they could not, or would not, bear: heavy demand on the memory, the reason, the attention they rejected point-blank. Where an English girl of not more than average capacity and docility would quietly take a theme and bend herself to the task of comprehension and mastery, a Labassecourienne would laugh in your face, and throw it back to you with the phrase,—“Dieu que c’est difficile! Je n’en veux pas. Cela m’ennuie trop.” (94; 3:09:30 – 3:10:00)

“God how it’s difficult. I don’t want it. It bores me too much.” Lucy believes her students’ poor learning skills are actually innate—a product of their “quick French blood” and “marsh-phlegm” rather than a learned response from the educational experiences of their past (92). At first she’s furious with them—

Lucy Snowe: [...] on the edge of a moral volcano, that rumbled under my feet and sent sparks and hot fumes into my eyes [...] (93; 3:07:56 – 3:08:02)

—but then she settles into contempt, adopting a cold, sarcastic manner toward her students and occasionally mocking them to keep their self-esteem low:

Lucy Snowe: I never knew them to rebel against a wound given to their self-respect: the little they had of that quality was trained to be crushed, and it rather liked the pressure of a firm heel, than otherwise. (94; 3:10:44 – 3:10:54)

Difficult as her situation may be, Lucy Snowe educates in a way that “reinforces dominance,” as bell hooks would say (hooks 4). In this case, she reinforces what she considers to be English dominance over the French in terms of their supposedly inborn work ethic and sense of decorum. Like St. Aubert, Montoni, Alphonse Frankenstein and M. Krempe before her, Lucy Snowe is a Gothic teacher whose pedagogy is informed by her own prejudices. Her own self-serving power hierarchy. Lucy Snowe, while in some senses a Gothic heroine, is simultaneously a Gothic villain.

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Gooblar: I know that a lot of professors are uncomfortable with their authority in the classroom and they feel uncomfortable grading students, and grading is a whole can of worms and I get it. I’m uncomfortable grading students.
This is David Gooblar, a Lecturer of Rhetoric at the University of Iowa and author of the book *The Missing Course: Everything They Never Taught You about College Teaching*. In his work, he argues that, ironically, college teachers are never really taught how to *teach*, and this circumstance sets the conditions for abuses of power.

**Gooblar:** But there *is* an authority that we have as instructors, as professors, and it’s imbued by the institution, and just by being uncomfortable with it, we can’t ignore it. And I think it’s on anyone with that authority to use that authority to structure class to be as equitable as possible [...] Um... so I do think that it very easily shades from sort of pedagogical choices to really like, ethical and moral choices.

This is precisely what I’ve been arguing all along—that the ways we treat students both inside and outside of the classroom is very much a matter of social justice... because, as professors, we have power over them – even if it may not always feel that way, or even if we’re uncomfortable with looking at it that way. And this is what I’ve seen happening in the Gothic too: student-teacher relationships being dramatized in ways that make clear how abusive teachers can be if they’re not careful.

But the thing that makes *Villette* a bit different from *Udolpho* and *Frankenstein* is that its author—Charlotte Brontë—doesn’t seem to critique Gothic teaching. In many ways, she praises it. The most obvious example is the stern, shame-oriented pedagogy of Lucy’s teaching-idol-turned-fiancée M. Paul Emanuel.

**Lucy Snowe:** “Prove yourself true ere I cherish you,” was his ordinance, and how difficult he made that proof! (406; 14:10:45 – 14:10:50).

The cousin of Mme. Beck and a well-regarded professor at the prestigious Athénée boys’ school in Villette, M. Paul is an imposing figure at the Pensionnat. Students tremble at his approach, which as Gooblar points out, doesn’t actually make him a great teacher by modern standards.
Gooblar: And the motivation—if they’re motivated by grades, they’re motivated by fear of embarrassment—that’s not very strong motivation, the research tells us. If they’re motivated by intrinsic means because they really want to learn, that is good. That is much more effective.

That is also decidedly not how M. Paul, the most lauded pedagogue of Villette, motivates his students. According to Lucy Snowe’s observations, it seems he wants students to be motivated by a desire for his approval.

Lucy Snowe: What thorns and briars, what flints he strewed in the path of feet not inured to rough travel! He watched tearlessly—ordeals that he thought should be passed through—fearlessly. He followed footprints that, as they approached the bourne, were sometimes marked in blood—followed them grimly, holding the austerest police-watch over the pain-pressed pilgrim. (407; 14:10:51 – 14:11:13)

Lucy explains that, for M. Paul, the pupil’s quest to learn is like the pilgrim’s quest to a holy site—in this case, the realm of knowledge. As pilgrims, his students wish to join some chosen group—the learned, the saved—and he has the power to grant their salvation. And he’s going to make that salvation as difficult to attain as possible, apparently.

Lucy Snowe: When at last he allowed a rest, before slumber might close the eyelids, he opened those same lids wide, with pitiless finger and thumb. […] If, at last, he let the neophyte sleep, it was but a moment; he woke him suddenly up to apply new tests: he sent him on irksome errands when he was staggering with weariness; he tried the temper, the sense, and the health; and it was only when every severest test had been applied and endured […] that he admitted it genuine and, still in clouded silence, stamped it with his deep brand of approval (407; 14:11:14 – 14:11:22, 14:11:35 – 14:11:52, 14:11:59 – 14:12:05).

One wonders how Brontë came up with this metaphor… where had she heard of the practices of sleep deprivation and “irksome errands” as initiation trials? Although it may seem surprising and completely unrelated, Brontë’s metaphor for M. Paul’s pedagogy bears a striking resemblance to something from our modern context: hazing. Specifically, the kind you might find in a college
frat house.⁸ And though we rarely think of hazing outside of that context, it could certainly exist in the Grad School Gothic as well.

Allan: Hazing is any activity expected of someone joining, seeking membership in, or maintaining one’s full status as a member in a club, organization, or team, that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers them regardless of the person’s willingness to participate.

This is Elizabeth Allan, Professor of Higher Education at the University of Maine and President and Co-Founder of the organization Stop Hazing. As she says here, the first component of hazing involves a person trying to join or maintain membership in a group and needing other members’ approval to do so. Similar to, say, trying to earn a degree by passing the examination of a handful of those who already hold it.

Allan: It’s like, “We don’t want to just let anyone in. They need to prove themselves. They need to show they’re worthy.”

There’s nothing inherently wrong with having standards, says Allan. If a group is founded with a certain mission in mind—say, to teach others about literature—then of course it makes sense that the group would want to ensure its members are fit to carry out that mission.

Allan: When we say we want to shift away from a hazing culture, we’re not saying that we’re not expecting people to work hard. And we’re not expecting people not to prove themselves. No. It’s just that we are rethinking how it is that they demonstrate that. And making sure that the ways in which we expect people to demonstrate it conform to the vision of what we say we’re about.

Pardon the pun, but things get haze-⁰, says Allan, when the group’s vision and training methods no longer match:

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⁸ In her article “Hazing and Higher Education: State Laws, Liability, and Institutional Implications,” Jacinda Boucher also includes “sleep deprivation” in her definition of hazing (par. 2). This practice is listed among the most common forms of hazing in the anti-hazing legislature of at least four U.S. states—West Virginia, Utah, Texas, and Rhode Island. See https://www.stophazing.org/?s=sleep&submit=Search.
Allan: I would say that would be number one, is alignment with the mission and goals and values of the group, and the larger context in which it operates. [...] Ya know [...] with an athletic team. You obviously expect people to have to come to practice! And the practice involves maybe doing push-ups or something like this. And same thing with the military! But it wouldn’t be okay for a doctoral student to be expected to do that in order to do their dissertation.

Sure – it would seem pretty absurd to ask someone to do push-ups to earn their Ph.D. But at this moment, when the humanities are undergoing a kind of identity crisis, and the aim of the Ph.D. no longer really seems to be landing a tenure-track job… it’s worth examining whether our mission and goals are still aligned, as Elizabeth Allan would say. Maybe, among other things, proto-monograph dissertations are the new push-ups. But back to *Villette*.

Lucy Snowe: “Prove yourself true ere I cherish you” (406; 14:10:45 – 14:10:48).

Do M. Paul’s training methods match the mission of the school? What is it that the “demoiselles” are being trained to do at Madame Beck’s Pensionnat? Lucy Snowe tells us that the school educates both “the young countess and the young bourgeoisie,” though she never explicitly says for what. If we can take any insight from the Pensionnat’s real-life counterpart—the Belgian school Brontë attended herself—then the chief mission of Madame Beck’s school was to prepare its “demoiselles” to be good wives and mothers. So no. M. Paul’s metaphorical “thorns and briars” wouldn’t seem to match that aim. Such methods seem uncalled for, and thus it would seem that M. Paul’s ruthless teaching is a form of hazing.

Nevertheless, and somewhat confusingly, he is adored by the school’s students. Take, for instance, the literal heap of honor they bestow on him each year for his birthday: at the start of the morning class, they parade into the classroom, each girl laying a bouquet on his desk until the

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9 Sue Lonoff asserts this point in her article “The Education of Charlotte Brontë” (2001): “By and large, both Hegers believed that education should prepare young women to be suitable partners: wives and mothers with solid moral values and more than a smattering of culture” (464).
mound becomes so high that he disappears behind it, engulfed by their adoration. Lucy Snowe contrasts this with the compulsory and flamboyant celebration for Madame Beck:

**Lucy Snowe:** It was an honour spontaneously awarded, not plotted and contrived beforehand, and offered an additional proof, amongst many others of the estimation in which—despite his partialities, prejudices, and irritabilities—the professor of literature was held by his pupils. (390; 13:34:00 – 13:34:17)

This might seem to offer evidence that M. Paul’s pedagogical ends justify the means… if students love him, he must not be abusing them after all, right? Back to Elizabeth Allan and the definition of hazing.

**Allan:** The third component, which is super important, especially because it’s often one that is an impediment [...] in understanding when something crosses the line into hazing… is that it can occur regardless of a person’s willingness to participate […] Because of the peer pressure, the inherent, um, power dynamics of the group where you have some people who are already members with other people seeking membership, and even if you give people a choice of whether or not they want to do it, it can be considered sometimes a coercive environment.

So, even if those on the receiving end of haze-y training practices participate willingly… even if they remain loyal to the person or institution performing the punishing initiation rituals… even if they seem to *consent* to the abuse, it’s still abuse. And when people begin willingly submitting themselves to abuse, says Allan, things get pretty convoluted pretty quickly.

**Allan:** Often if a fraternity decides in good faith to shift its hazing culture, the next group of recruits will say, “But wait a minute! I *wanted* to be hazed!”

This may not be what you’d expect, but in a way, it makes sense…

**Allan:** Ya know, because it gave them a feeling of, um, worth? And that they would be judged at the same level of quality as the other members who came before them, etc. etc.

In other words, when a system of training is abusive, it has the unexpected side effect of teaching current *and future* trainees that surviving abuse is the only way to prove your worth.
Lucy Snowe: I never knew them to rebel against a wound given to their self-respect: the little they had of that quality was trained to be crushed, and it rather liked the pressure of a firm heel, than otherwise. (94; 3:10:44 – 3:10:54)

“It rather liked the pressure of a firm heel, than otherwise.” It’s a bit like Stockholm Syndrome…beginning to sympathize—even fall in love with—your tormenters.

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Brontë (Stubbs): Sometimes he borrows the lineaments of an insane tomcat, sometimes those of a delirious hyena, occasionally, but very seldom, he discards these perilous attractions and assumes an air not above a hundred degrees removed from mild and gentleman-like. (14:53 – 15:13)

This is Charlotte Brontë—or, a voice actress playing Charlotte Brontë—describing her real-life professor Constantin Héger in a letter to her friend Ellen Nussey dated May 1842—about three months after she arrived at the Pensionnat Héger. At twenty-six years old, Brontë was pursuing a continental education so she could one day open up her own school for girls in England. In this letter to her friend, she first describes the headmistress, then moves on to describe someone who, to readers of Villette, should sound very familiar.

Brontë (Stubbs): Monsieur Héger, the husband of Madame, is Professor of Rhetoric—a man of power as to mind, but very choleric and irritable in temperament. A little black being with a face that varies in expression. (14:40 – 14:52)

As many Brontë biographers and scholars have pointed out, the M. Paul of Villette seems quite clearly to be modeled on the real-life Constantin Héger. For comparison, here’s Lucy Snowe’s description of M. Paul the first time she sees him:


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10 See, for instance, Sue Lonoff’s “The Three Faces of Constantin Heger” (Brontë Studies 36.1, January 2011), Juliet Barker’s The Brontës (2010), and Marianne Thormählen’s The Brontës and Education (2007).
And like Héger’s “tomcat” or “hyena”-like temper, here’s Lucy Snowe’s description of M. Paul’s:

**Lucy Snowe:** The scarce-suppressed impetus of a most irritable nature glowed in his cheek, fed with sharp shafts his glances, a nature—the injudicious, the mawkish, the hesitating, the sullen, the affected, above all, the unyielding, might quickly render violent and implacable. (153; 5:14:29 – 5:14:47)

The way Lucy Snowe handles M. Paul’s temper also looks a lot like Brontë with Héger:

**Lucy Snowe:** It was time to soothe him a little if possible. “Mais, monsieur,” said I, “I would not insult you for the world. I remember too well that you once said we should be friends.” I did not intend my voice to falter, but it did […] I wept […] “Allons, allons!” said he presently, “Decidedly I am a monster and a ruffian.” (279; 9:45:13 – 9:45:53)

Compare this to Charlotte’s description of a recent interaction with M. Héger in her letter to Ellen Nussey:

**Brontë (Stubbs):** He is very angry with me just at present, because I have written a translation which he chose to stigmatize as _peu correct_. […] When he is very ferocious with me, I cry. That sets all things straight. (15:14 – 15:41)

It seems clear that Lucy Snowe, like her creator, preferred a harsh pedagogy and seemed to have a romantic infatuation with her harsh professor.

**Lucy Snowe:** I liked, for instance, to see M. Emanuel jealous; it lit up his nature, and woke his spirit; it threw all sorts of queer lights and shadows over his dun face, and into his violet-azure eyes. (177; 6:07:36 – 6:07:49)

The novel is full of passionate scenes of M. Paul yelling at her, shaming her to tears, but unlike the typical abused student, Lucy—and Charlotte—seem… less than put off by it.

**Brontë (Stubbs):** It is natural to me to submit and _very_ unnatural to command. (14:05 – 14:10)

Even if they _didn’t_ have a seemingly masochistic attraction to their emotionally abusive teachers, though, it’s still unsurprising that Lucy Snowe and Charlotte Brontë condone such methods and
even become emotionally abusive teachers themselves. In psychology, the victim-to-victimizer hypothesis is ubiquitous: as already discussed with Victor Frankenstein, often the downtrodden student goes on to become the teacher who applies…

Lucy Snowe: the pressure of a firm heel. (94; 3:10:51 – 3:10:54)

Hazers gonna haze. And Lucy’s comments about “crushing” her students’ self-respect in order to keep them in line illustrates how directly influenced she is by her own hazer, M. Paul.

Lucy Snowe: A constant crusade against the amour-propre of every human being, but himself, was the crotchet of this able, but fiery and grasping little man. (176; 6:05:43 – 6:05:52)

This term – “amour-propre” – means “personal pride,” or the self-respect that Lucy also likes to crush in her students.

When she has this attitude, it’s no wonder she received such a scathing evaluation from her student. She really is…

Lucy Snowe: “[…] that dragon the English teacher.” (127; 4:19:57 – 4:20:00)

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As I’ve been doing all along, though, let’s have one last show of sympathy for the dragon. According to the victim-to-victimizer hypothesis, Lucy doesn’t know any better. She’s just mindlessly reproducing the abusive teaching practices she’s experienced, and that she and the entire school seem to be enamored with. It’s the same with the Grad School Gothic.

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11 A landmark work that was among the first to present abuse as cyclical is *The Battered Child* (1968), especially the chapter by B.F. Steele and C.D. Pollock titled “A Psychiatric Study of Parents Who Abuse Infants and Small Children.”

12 Amour-propre is a term that is also frequently used (and condemned) by William Crimsworth, protagonist of Brontë’s *The Professor* (1857)—widely considered to be a first draft of *Villette* that was only published after her death. Tellingly, given the sadomasochistic elements in the teacher-student relationships at the heart of both novels, *The Professor* was first titled *The Master*.

13 For the translation/definition of Brontë’s “amour propre,” see Sally Minogue’s notes to *The Professor* (Wordsworth Classics, 2010), p. 207.
**Gooblar:** Probably because undergraduate education is such a big topic, there’s so many more undergrads and it affects more than just the academy, we tend to ignore graduate education all together. Except when people are worrying about there not being jobs for Ph.D.’s, Right? That’s something that gets talked about. But how graduate students are educated just isn’t talked about. And… and it shows that it’s not talked about, because it’s not much different than it was twenty years ago or fifty years ago, I would bet.

One reason for this sustained, unexamined graduate pedagogy? Like Elizabeth Allan said:

**Allan:** It’s like, “We don’t want to just let anyone in. They need to prove themselves. They need to show they’re worthy.”

The idea that, because these are the highest degrees awarded by the academy, they need to be “rigorous.” They need to prove that someone is “worthy” of being a “doctor” or an “expert” at something. And it’s true, these degrees do need to be rigorous. But still, as Gooblar says,

**Gooblar:** The idea that abusive or neglectful Ph.D. advisors is about “rigor” strikes me as a post-hoc rationalization. Right? It’s, “This is the way it’s always been done. Let me figure out how to justify how it’s been done.” Um, but if we think of Ph.D. advising as teaching, then we need to think, “Well, what are our goals, and what are the best ways to get there?” And I think once we think about our goals, which is, at the very least, to make future academics, um, then it becomes obvious really really quickly that the way we do it now is not the best way to do it.

Training future academics *does* need to be rigorous. People need to identify pressing theoretical and practical lines of inquiry in their chosen fields and try to figure out ways to contribute. But training them to do that by having them write a 200-page document that must meet the approval of mainly one monolithic authority figure is probably not, as Gooblar says, the best way to do it.

**Gooblar:** I think it would be good for, um, any graduate program that’s interested in not just fairness but sustainability to move away from a model in which a graduate student’s education is 100% invested in one person. Right? It is so dangerous… and we’ve heard… we’ve heard so many horror stories of outright abuse. But even when there’s not outright abuse, there’s so many opportunities for a career to be ruined… for a person’s education to be, uh, caught off track. Because the department basically says, “Well, it was that one person’s responsibility.” And so I really would love to see departments make it a priority that um, the responsibility is shared over a number of people, and that in fact the department has much more oversight over supervision.
It’s a matter of social justice – of making the academy feel more inclusive and, eventually, look more inclusive too. And it’s really not just about training teachers… it’s also about training students. Because when we act like monoliths in the classroom – as in the case of “that dragon the English teacher” – we train our students to dehumanize us. We turn them, in other words, into monsters of our own creation.

Mean evals, then – and I mean the really mean ones with personal barbs – can be seen as a record of students’ abuse. Not the kind they give out, but the kind they’ve experienced. They’ve been trained to believe their professors are these all-knowing, inhuman beings whose mysterious approval will make or break them. The students who lash out are often the ones who carry the most trauma. And a truly student-centered pedagogue knows this.

Back to Lulu, one such pedagogue, who did not lock her monster-pupil in the closet.

**Lulu:** Even with this student, this female student, I still worry about her. Even though she’s made my life very difficult, the reason I didn’t tell her to drop the class weeks ago is because I wanted to see if I could help her through this course. Um, I could tell something was up, and usually when a student acts out, something is up. And in a university like this, it’s so easy for a student like that to get lost.

“It’s so easy for a student like that to get lost.” The best way to combat the student-monster – to undo the makings of their monstrousness – is to recognize that students were, at some point, taught to be monsters, which means they can be un-taught…by being handled with care. To break the cycle of mindless pedagogical reproduction, we need to step away from the edge of the moral volcano.
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