

Contagious Others: The Egyptian Ophthalmia in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Elizabeth A. Dolan

bdolan@lehigh.edu

From *Seeing Suffering in Women's Literature of the
Romantic Period*, Ashgate Press (2008)

Plot summary

Embedded narration

Robert Walton (sea captain and frame narrator who writes the story in letters to his sister)

Victor Frankenstein (scientist who tells his story to Walton when rescued by his ship)

The Creature (tells his story to Victor, story is embedded in Victor's retelling to Walton)

Outline and Terms

Introduction

Physical invisibility

Cultural invisibility

Contagion

Othering

Endemic

Epidemic

Sympathy

Sympathetic contagion

Alienating deformity

Introduction

Mary Shelley

My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. *I saw*—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—*I saw* the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. *I saw* the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out . . .

Introduction

Victor

*I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. 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? 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.**

Contagion

Arthur Edmondston, *A treatise on the varieties and consequences of ophthalmia* (1806)

It is perhaps impossible to ascertain, with any degree of precision, the period when Ophthalmia first became so widely prevalent in Egypt; but it is highly probable, that its occurrence was in some measure connected with the final subjugation of that country by the Turks. . . .

Idleness and the indulgence in depraved habits rendered the frame obnoxious to general disease; and the constant use of the turban, enjoined by the rigid tenets of the Koran among all ranks, weakened and exposed the eyes directly to the action of every exciting cause of Ophthalmia.

Contagion

James Ware, Letter to the Editor of the *London Times*, 11 August 1806

The violence of the inflammation of the eyes, to which the natives of Egypt are subject, is well known; . . . the great numbers of soldiers who returned to England . . . in a state of total blindness, [proves] its tendency to destroy vision. The general opinion has hitherto been, that the Ophthalmia . . . was confined to Egypt, and was dependent on such local circumstances as rendered other countries secure from its influence.

Contagion

Arthur Edmondston, *A treatise on the varieties and consequences of ophthalmia* (1806)

Multitudes of soldiers, on their arrival in England from Egypt, laboured under Ophthalmia. . . . Intimate and frequent intercourse naturally took place between them and persons in perfect health; cleanliness . . . was here disregarded, *for the disease was considered local and uninfectious*. Owing to these circumstances, Ophthalmia appeared at the same time in the most distant parts of Great Britain; and . . . is now familiar to almost every medical practitioner.

Contagion

Victor while creating (endemic model)

A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs.

Contagion

Victor after the creature comes to life (epidemic model)

Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror.

Sympathy

Arthur Edmondston, *A treatise on the varieties and consequences of ophthalmia*

[W]e cannot sympathize with objects of horror or disgust, and such I conceive disease to be under any form. There is an insuperable repugnance in human nature to every species of corporeal pain; and we never behold a disease in another person, without a self-congratulation at our own exemption, and a hope that we may escape it altogether. If this view be correct, it does not appear that Ophthalmia can be propagated by sympathy.