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## Invoking the Incubus: Mary Shelly's Use of the Demon-Lover Tradition in Frankenstein

Christopher M. Lamphear  
*Cleveland State University*

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INVOKING THE INCUBUS: MARY SHELLEY'S USE OF THE DEMON-LOVER TRADITION IN  
*FRANKENSTEIN*

CHRISTOPHER M. LAMPHEAR

Bachelor of Science in Communication

Ohio University

December 2002

Master of Arts in Education

Ursuline College

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submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

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This thesis has been approved  
for the Department of English  
and the College of Graduate Studies by

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Thesis Chairperson, Dr. Gary R. Dyer

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Department & Date

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Dr. Rachel K. Carnell

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Department & Date

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Dr. Adam T. Sonstegard

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Department & Date

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**ABSTRACT**

The image and behavior of Shelley's infamous creature is similar to that of the mythical Incubus demon. By presenting Victor's hideous progeny as a reproduction of the Incubus myth, Shelley seems to provide her nineteenth-century reader with the image of demons, who for many, already haunted their nightmares. Shelley would likely have been familiar with the Incubus myth. Her fascination with her dead mother led her to the artist Henry Fuseli, whose painting "The Nightmare" depicts the Incubus Demon. Shelley wrote during a time in which medical scholars such as Dr. Bond and Dr. Waller explored a malady that they named after the demon-lover legend. Shelley often depicts her creature, standing over and suffocating his sleeping victim in the same manner as the Incubus demon. This subtle allusion to the Incubus myth indicates that Shelley's nineteenth-century reader was well versed in the demon lover tradition.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTER	
I    INTRODUCTION.....	1
II   THE LEGEND OF THE INCUBUS DEMON.....	6
III  MARY SHELLEY'S CONNECTION TO THE INCUBUS MYTH.....	15
IV   MARY SHELLEY'S USE OF DEMON IMAGERY.....	22
V    STRANGULATION AND SUFFOCATION.....	29
VI   DREAM STATE RECURRENCES.....	33
VII  CONCLUSIONS.....	36
WORKS CITED.....	38
APPENDIX A: "The Nightmare" by Henry Fuseli.....	40

CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has become so much more than a story about a man and his monster. Nearly two centuries after its first publication, the novel continues to haunt readers as they ponder the implications of humanity's growing fascination with science. Shelley provides her reader with a compelling image of Victor's creation, born innocent and corrupted by experience. Throughout the text, Victor refers to his creation with terms like "creature," "spectre," "monster" and "daemon." The use of the term "daemon" is of particular interest because demons are celestial beings, and not of temporal origins. By referring to his creation with such a term, Victor seems to equate his own role with that of a deity; creating life in much the same way that God would. Victor refers to his creation by the term "daemon" fifteen times in the novel. This choice to refer to the creature in the language of a more supernatural demon may reflect her early nineteenth-century reader's fascination with demon mythology.

One of the most iconic moments in the novel depicts the creature hiding in a hovel and observing the blind DeLacey and his family. During this time, the creature happens upon a satchel of books, including a copy of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. When



presented with the depictions of Adam and Satan, the creature readily identifies with the latter, whose experience of being created and ignored by his creator mirrors that of the creature. The creature reflects that:

Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine...Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me. (Shelley 87)

By recognizing his connection to Satan, the creature seems to see himself as the "daemon" that Victor often refers to. It is at this point in the novel that the creature not only connects with the tragic circumstances of Satan's fall, but also perceives his own ability to inflict destruction on others. And just like Satan, who swears to make "a hell of heaven, a heaven of hell," the monster embraces his ability to inflict pain. Upon meeting Victor in the mountains, and narrating the events of his existence, the monster suggests that "if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear; and chiefly towards you my arch enemy" (98). Like Satan, the creature is willing to embrace the hell that he has been cast into. The connection between Victor's creature and the Miltonic Satan has been well established and even the most casual modern reader can understand the significance of his reading of "Paradise Lost." However, Shelley also reinforces the depiction of the creature as a demonic fiend by alluding to a myth that is less recognizable for a modern reader, but perhaps was more familiar for her nineteenth-century reader. The purpose of this paper is to explore Shelley's use of the Incubus myth in the writing of *Frankenstein*.

Despite the vast amount of literature that exists on Shelley's novel, little attention has been paid to the demonic image of Victor's creature. Modern scholars recognize the inconsistent behavior of Victor as he narrates his own confusion over what is real and what is not. They also address certain elements of the story, that seem improbable. Modern critics apply modern theory in an attempt to understand Shelley's somewhat perplexing novel. These critics have focused on two general areas which are more popular for twentieth-century critics. For scholars such Mellor, Veeder and Moers,<sup>1</sup> a great deal of attention has been paid to a feminist critique of the novel. Given Shelley's preoccupation with her mother, a topic that will be explored in greater detail later in this paper, it is not surprising that so much attention has been paid by critics to this sort of issue. There has also been a considerable amount of literature dedicated to a psychoanalytic analysis of the novel, its author, and its characters. It has been the task of authors such as Jane Goodall and Dean Franco<sup>2</sup> to examine how Victor's creation experiences its own Lacanian mirror stage, or how the monster seems to manifest the intangible qualities that Victor strives so hard to repress. Both of these approaches have been vehicles for the exploration of Victor's unpredictable behavior and while the novel lends itself well to both, it is indeed important to remember that they reflect the critical approach of a twentieth-century reader. The study of demon mythology might serve to offer an explanation for the behavior of Victor and his creature that would have been more accessible to her early-nineteenth-century reader.

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<sup>1</sup> Moers, Ellen. "Female Gothic: The Monster's Mother." Mellor, Anne. "Usurping the Female." Veeder, William. "The Women of *Frankenstein*."

<sup>2</sup> Franco, Dean. "Mirror Images And Otherness In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." Goodall, Jane. "Frankenstein And The Reprobate's Conscience."

Even Mary Shelley's early critics seem to have paid little attention to the demonic imagery of the creature. And while I will make the argument in this paper that Shelley's reader would have been more versed in the myth of the Incubus than a modern reader, the myth itself was still somewhat controversial. By the time Shelley published her novel, the idea of demons visiting mortals in their sleep was rejected by the intellectual elite. It seems unlikely that a critic of the novel in the nineteenth century would focus analysis on a myth that by that time was little more than folk-lore. However, as I will explore later in this paper, romantics like Shelley often made use of such folk-lore in their writing. By subtly alluding to the Incubus myth, Shelley seems to be playing upon her reader's fascination with the supernatural.

The Incubus myth fits in with a tradition of literary allusion employed by Shelley to make her novel more palatable for the common reader. A great deal of scholarship exists exploring her allusions to texts like Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Both of these works reflect that same fascination with the supernatural that seems so prevalent with Shelley's reader. John Lamb takes a more historical approach toward understanding how Shelley's readers might have responded to allusions in the novel. In his article "Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Milton's Monstrous Myth" Lamb suggests that Shelley's novel is meant to subvert the restrictive ontological self-identifications that result from Puritanical works like Milton's. Lamb argues that "the monster's identity has been shaped by a cultural myth in which the fallen can be only Adam or Lucifer" (Lamb 303). Milton's work establishes a restrictive rubric in which an individual can either be like the paradisiac Adam, obsequious and

naive, or the fallen Satan, ambitious and sinful. According to Lamb, Shelley belongs in the category of Romantics who viewed Satan in a more sympathetic way. Therefore, the creature's struggle to place himself in the Miltonic rubric serves to subvert the rigid sense of puritanical identity that existed for Shelley's reader. The changing sympathies of Shelley's reader are emblematic of a population that was greatly fascinated by the legends of such demons, and so it only makes sense for Shelley to employ subtle allusions to demon mythology in her own work.

Shelley uses literary allusion as a framework so that her reader may better comprehend the fantastical events of the novel. She invokes the legends of Prometheus, Satan, and the cursed Ancient Mariner and in doing so, provides her reader with more recognizable myths that serve as reference points for understanding Victor and his creation. However, Shelley also makes use of a myth that is less prevalent for a modern reader, but one that may have been more widely understood in early nineteenth-century Britain. As mentioned earlier, the image and behavior of Shelley's creature is very similar to that of the mythical Incubus demon. By presenting Victor's hideous progeny as a reproduction of the Incubus myth, Shelley seems to provide her nineteenth-century reader with the images of demons, who for many, already haunted their nightmares.

## CHAPTER II

### THE LEGEND OF THE INCUBUS DEMON

The myth of the Incubus dates back to Greek and Roman mythology. The term "Incubus" is Latin and means "one who presses upon or crushes" (Kiessling 2). The Incubus is a male demon that rapes young women as they sleep. Legend also speaks of a female counterpart, the Succubus, who would visit men in their dreams. The Incubus takes on many forms, including the reincarnated ghost of a dead person, as well as "other forms as demon, goatlike animal, deformed human being, goblin, or even deity" (2). The legend takes its origin from the tradition of the Gods and demigods. It was not uncommon for Greek and Roman Gods to appear to mortal women in varying forms to copulate and produce half-blood offspring. The term "incubation" comes from the same myth, and first referred to pilgrims, who would visit shrines of Greek Gods like Asclepius, Hygeia and Panacea, and would sleep or incubate by the shrines in the hope that the particular God would visit them in their dreams and provide cures for their maladies (Kiessling). It would appear to women, often to rape them or frighten them to fidelity. However, the incubus demon was not always presented as villainous. According to

author Nicolas Kiessling, the Incubus "was a destroyer but more often a healer, a lecher but more often a kind of guardian attendant, a demon but never a devil, although later on Christians personified the devil in his goatlike form" (8). They are said to be the sires to giants and witches. In Arthurian tradition, the wizard Merlin is said to derive his power from his Incubus parentage.

Even the bible alludes to the presence of the Incubus and Succubus demons. The son of Adam and Eve, Cain is seduced by a Succubus demon, who then spawns a race of monsters that accounts for the existence of Grendel in the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. The Book of Genesis may allude to the presence of such demons and separates them as beings that are neither human nor angel. Chapter six details the development of the human race up to the time of Noah and the possible interactions between rebel angels and mortals. The scripture describes the interaction "when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bear children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown" (McArthur). While this may seem to refer directly to the union of mortal men and women, a close reading of this passage may suggest the presence of night-demons. The Jewish scripture of Enoch is one of several that uses the phrase "sons of God" to refer to angels, rather than mankind (Kiessling). However, these fallen angels, who copulate with women, take on a status of their own. These angels who have "fallen because of carnal intercourse with women, became satellites and ministers of Satan-beings of a middle nature, neither angels or men" (11). The children of these unions were mighty like the men of renown from the past, which might refer back to the demigod tradition. Often these demons would try to seduce the

chaste, like in the story of St. Anthony of Padua. The patron saint of animals and pregnant women is himself seduced by the devil who appears to him in the form of a beautiful woman (Kiessling).

By the thirteenth century, the religious debate over the existence and activity of incubi and succubae was debated by clerics. Initially, Catholic officials did not acknowledge the claim that demons could interact as corporal entities with other mortals (Kiessling). However, the inquisition in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries changed this view in response to religious uprisings throughout the land:

After 1230 sorcery became associated with heresy in increasing frequency. The inquisitors began to concentrate on matters concerned with sorcery, witchcraft, and illicit sexual relations with incubi, or even somewhat later, with the devil himself in ritual ceremonies. (24)

According to the new doctrine, the demons themselves were not capable of reproduction. Instead, the Incubus and Succubus worked together. The Succubus would seduce and copulate with a sleeping male to collect their seed and then the Incubus would transfer that seed to a woman by the same means. While the myth appeared in different cultural forms for much of history, it was first acknowledged officially in 1484 by Pope Innocent VIII (McClennon, and Edwards). For the Catholic Church, these legends served a very practical purpose, as they helped to repress human sexuality by suggesting that certain feelings of lust were actually the result of demoniacal visitations. Five years later, *Malleus Maleficarum*, which was a medieval spiritual guidebook, defined Incubi by "their practice of overlaying, that is debauching. For they often lust lecherously after women, and copulate with them" (Kramer, and Jacob). While there is no direct evidence to suggest that Shelley read this book, its impact was felt in works she was familiar with.

William Shakespeare's weird sisters in *The Tragedy of Macbeth* mix a potion which includes ingredients like "liver of blaspheming Jew" and "finger of birth-strangled babe." This image is very similar to the one presented in *Malleus Malificarum*, which defines witches by their practice of potion making. Often, these potions were brewed to prepare an individual for their impending encounter with a night demon (Kramer, and Jacob). This book, which was validated by a papal bull, also suggested that women were easy victims for Incubi because of the frailties of their sex, which is reflected in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's depiction of Eve as vane and intellectually inferior to Adam, is one that is addressed in *Vindication of the Rights of Women* written of course by Mary Shelley's own mother.

By the time of the enlightenment in the seventeenth century, the idea of corporal demons haunting mortals was for the most part dispelled. While the scientific community sufficiently suppressed such myths, they were reborn in the fictional poetry of the gothic romantic poets of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The writing of Sir Walter Scott is inundated with the demon lover tradition. Of particular interest to this paper is the symbolic significance of the incubus to the romantic poets.

Scott suggests that:

The other poets of the Romantic period, although they still drew on traditional sources in their depiction of the supernatural figures, began to use them in a new way to symbolize both the temptations and aspirations of man in terms of his underlying fear or his wonder at being able to transcend or transform his condition. (Kiessling76)

The romantics were fascinated with Milton's presentation of Satan and his fellow demons, whose hamartia makes them more relatable to a group of poets who



celebrated the sinful nature of man. Coleridge, in his enigmatic poem "Kubla Khan" makes reference to a "woman wailing for her demon lover" and suggests that she should "Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair." These images invoke the possible presence of the Incubus demon. Like the plays of Shakespeare and Milton's epic poem, young Mary Shelley was well versed in the poetry of Coleridge, who visited her father on several occasions while Mary was a child (Mellor). In the plays of Lord Byron, many of the Byronic heroes are antagonized by demon spirits whose trickery causes the heroes to suffer from some sort of hamartia. Mary Shelley's own husband Percy alludes to the presence of the demon lover in his own poetry. Percy Shelley's idealistic frustration, which led to his exile from England, is evident in his work, as he alludes to supernatural beings as a metaphor for the unattainable in his own life. His poem "Alastor" explores the frustration of the poet narrator who is unable to discover the hidden beauty of the world. Shelley depicts the "demon lover, here in the form of a veiled maid, appears early in the quest and literally destroys the poet by offering him a more exquisite beauty than he can bear" (KieSSLing 81). The poet is tempted by the night-demon Alastor, and travels in search of that which he only encounters in dreams. Shelley uses the metaphor of nature as a veiled woman, who visits and embraces the poet in his dream. However, when he wakes, the feelings of isolation and despair return and like the victim of an Incubus attack yearns for his return to the dream. For the romantics, the myth of the Incubus served as a symbol, representing the unconquerable power of nature that could not be easily defined by men of reason.

The belief in night demons was reinforced by the symptoms of a medical condition that today is known as Sleep Paralysis. And while the belief in corporal demons visiting mortals in the midst of sleep was dispelled by the time Mary Shelley wrote, many people still experienced symptoms that in the past were attributed to the demon lover tradition. However, it was not seriously considered by the medical community until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the earliest scientific records of this phenomenon is *An Essay on the Incubus, or Night-mare* written by Dr. John Bond in 1753. In his essay, he describes the experience of those who suffer from such an affliction. According to Bond, “the Night-mare generally seized people sleeping on their backs, and often begins with frightful dreams, which are soon succeeded by a difficult respiration, a violent oppression on the breast, and a total privation of voluntary motion” (Bond 2). The patient’s heart beats faster, they suffer great anxiety and struggle mightily until they are able to throw themselves from their bed or another person enters the room and brings the event to an end. The victim suffers frightful dreams, which are followed by certain physical reactions to the encounter. Bond points out that:

Every one knows that the harmony and connection between the body and the mind are so established and constituted, while they are united, that the diseases of the one always affect the other in a very sensible manner; and experience daily demonstrates that violent passions of the mind produce fevers, fainting fits, and other severe effects on the body. (Bond 22)

Physicians in the eighteenth century started to speculate that the encounters might actually be caused by the position of the victim, rather than by some mischievous demon. They suggested the posture of the supine patient restricted the return blood

flow from the brain, thus inhibiting the operation of the nervous system. The body in the supine position allows for blood to flow more freely and therefore results in a greater deal of blood in the brain than at any other time. This, doctors in the eighteenth century believed was the cause of the night-mare or Incubus syndrome.

Writing in 1816, Dr. John Waller describes the Incubus syndrome in which patients would wake up in panic, feeling a weight bearing down upon their chest, immobilizing them. According to Waller:

It is not very surprising that persons labouring under this extraordinary affection, should ascribe it to the agency of some daemon, or evil spirit...Those, however, who labour under this affliction to any great degree can bear testimony to the distress and alarm which it occasions; in many cases rendering the approach of night a cause of terror, and life itself miserable, from the dread of untimely suffocation. (Waller 9-10)

Published in 1816, Waller's book served both to explain the symptoms and to try to provide remedy for a condition he termed "The Incubus Syndrome." Waller suggests that there is a significant difference between this phenomenon and the common nightmare. For one, Waller points out that respiration is not affected during a nightmare, while a victim of the Incubus syndrome has a great deal of trouble breathing. The episode usually begins with a bad dream that causes the victim to feel truly alarmed. Waller suggests that the victim "imagines that he is exposed to some danger, or pursued by some enemy which he cannot avoid" (21-22). He points out as well that the victim feels confined, helpless, even paralyzed and in danger of suffocating. During these attacks, the victims are likely to hallucinate and try to throw themselves from the bed to alleviate the weight from their chest. When the victim wakes, he will make violent efforts to free his limbs in an attempt to throw the perceived weight from his

chest. The victim panics as "every breath he draws, seems to be almost the last that he is likely to draw; the heart generally moves with increase velocity, sometimes is affected with palpitation; the countenance appears ghastly, and the eyes are half open" (23). Maybe most importantly, it is not uncommon for the patient to experience hallucinations, as a result of these episodes. For example "it is by no means an uncommon thing for the person...to see, or at least to imagine that he sees, some figure, either human, or otherwise, standing by him, threatening him, or deriding, or oppressing him" (26). Waller even points out that often, these hallucinations "produce terrors which I verily believe sometimes prove fatal" (26). The episode feels so real to the individual that they are unlikely to attribute it to a dream, and cannot easily acknowledge the deceit, even when they wake alone in their room. The visions themselves often become repetitive, as the patient suffers a series of episodes, which serves to convince him that the visions are indeed real. Waller even tells an interesting story of a young man, whose bout with this disease became fatal:

In the night, or towards morning, he was heard by some of the family in the house where he lodged to vociferate and groan as he had been accustomed to do during the paroxysms of Night-Mare; but as he was, after no great length of time, perfectly quiet, no person went to his assistance. In the morning, however, it was soon observed that he did not, as usual, make his appearance, and on some person going into his room, he was found dead, having thrown himself by his exertions and struggles out of bed, with his feet, however, still entangled among the bed-clothes. (Waller 17)

The fact that the body was found thrown from the bed, with the feet still tangled in the sheets further supports the assertion that the victims feel confined during their attacks. Dr. Waller alludes to several of his patients, and his experiences treating them for this

particular syndrome. He writes of a young patient who, in the middle of the night visited the doctor's lodging during one of his fits. However, the imagery of the scene is particularly compelling as Waller describes that he:

Awoke from my sleep one morning about four o'clock, at least it appeared to me that I awoke, and heard distinctly the voice of this young gentleman, who seemed to be coming hastily up the stairs leading to my apartment...and immediately after I saw him standing by my bed-side holding the curtains open, expressing all that wildness in his looks, which accompanies violent delirium...During all this scene I was attempting to speak, but could not articulate...When I waited upon my patient in the morning, I was not a little surprised to find that he was asleep; and was utterly confounded on being told that he had been so all night. (Waller 42-43)

What's interesting about this experience is that Dr. Waller is not describing the episode of one his patients, but rather his own experience with the Incubus Syndrome. He is the one who feels trapped in bed, lying in the supine position as he looks up upon some oppressor. The image of his patient, holding open the curtain and standing over his bed, will be revisited later in this paper. This affliction causes its victim to suffer from a great deal of anxiety, which is often brought on by horrifying hallucinations. While scholars like Dr. Waller describe a medical condition that is no way caused by corporal demons, the fact that they refer to this condition as "The Incubus Syndrome" suggests a certain level of awareness of the myth by the early nineteenth-century populace. Waller wrote his book to provide a scientific explanation to what some of his readers firmly believed to be caused by demons. Of particular interest to this paper is the fact that Dr. Waller was studying and writing about this disease in 1816, which just happens to be the same year that Mary Shelley wrote her masterpiece *Frankenstein*.

## CHAPTER III

### MARY SHELLEY'S CONNECTION TO THE INCUBUS MYTH

Mary Shelley conceived of her famous creature during a summer retreat in Switzerland in 1816. Mary and her husband Percy journeyed to Geneva to visit Lord Byron (Mellor). They were joined by Byron's physician John Polidori, who traveled with Byron throughout Europe and wrote his thesis on sleepwalking. Given his travels and the focus of his studies, it is not inconceivable that Polidori would have crossed paths with Dr. Waller, who served as a surgeon for the Royal Navy and whose treatise was published in London in 1816 (Waller). The group of young writers spent much of their time reading old German ghost stories, since the weather that particular summer was very dreary. Inspired by these stories, the group decided to have a contest, in which each writer would compose their own ghost story. Shelley chronicles this contest in her introduction to the 1831 version of her novel. She tried to think of a story that would:

Rival those which had excited us to the task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror - one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. (Shelley 171)

Shelley reveals that the image of her creature coming to life first appeared to her through a series of dreams. Throughout her youth, Mary suffered several traumatic events which may have served as an impetus to the promethean themes of her work. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was a famous feminist writer who died shortly after giving birth to Mary. Her father, William Godwin, was also a famed writer, known for his radical ideas that attacked the aristocracy. He greatly felt the loss of Wollstonecraft, not just as a loving wife, but as a proper mother for young Mary (Mellor). In an attempt to fill the latter, Godwin decided to wed Mary Jane Clairmont, who brought her own children into the Godwin home. Clairmont openly favored her own children, and this favoritism caused conflict between her and young Mary Godwin. The loss of her mother traumatized Mary and influenced her writing, as many of her characters struggle in search of maternal guidance. Her later marriage to Percy Shelley also turned out to be very traumatic. Their marriage caused a scandal, primarily due to the fact that Percy was already married. Still, the young couple ran off together and as a consequence, were cut off from their family and their funds. They lived in squalor, so it should not be surprising that their first child Clara died shortly after childbirth. It was during this time that Shelley started to experience dreams that would later have a profound impact on her writing. The lack of a proper mother figure and her subsequent perceived failure to become one herself had a profound impact on Shelley and her novel.

The actual image of Victor bringing his creature to life is one that also appeared to Shelley in a dream. In her introduction to the 1831 revised edition, she describes her dream:

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, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world (Shelley 172).

Shelley is both fascinated and horrified by the prospect of a man, circumventing the laws of God and nature and evading death. For Shelley, such forays into science could only result in man creating instruments of his own destruction.

Though Shelley's initial conception of the creature may have been inspired by dreams, the actual image of the creature, as presented in the book appearing like an Incubus demon, is one that may have been fostered through her connections with the friends of her parents and her husband. Through her husband, Shelley became very close with a man by the name of Thomas Jefferson Hogg (Mellor). She chronicles her relationship with Hogg in her journal, and in December of 1814, she writes of a conversation with him that may reinforce her awareness of the Incubus legend:

In the evening Hogg comes. He describes an apparition of a lady, whom he had loved, appearing to him after her death; she came in the twilight summer night, and was hardly visible; she touched his cheek with her hands, and visited him many successive nights; he was always unaware of her approach, and passed many waking hours in expectation of it. (Feldman, and Scott-Kilvert 54)

At first glance, it seems possible that Hogg here is simply describing a ghost, but there are certain details which may link this apparition to a succubus (the female version of the incubus, who rapes men at night). First is the fact that this experience was a recurring one, with the spectre visiting him over several nights. Waller, in his book on the Incubus syndrome, suggests that often the attacks of Incubi and Succubi result from



emotional trauma, and will revisit a person over a series of nights. These repeated encounters reinforce to the victim their belief that the episodes are real. Second, Waller suggests that with such repetition, the patient begins to almost yearn or even expect the visits, and is desirous of the encounters. The last line of her entry suggests that Hogg was expecting the return of the woman. Finally, when writing about her own dreams, Shelley uses the term "dream" itself, but nowhere in her description of Hogg's encounter does she suggest that it was a dream. Considering the fact that the demon lover myth was more prevalent during Shelley's time, perhaps what she is describing in her journal is what both she and Hogg believed to be the visitation of a Succubus.

The second connection that might reinforce the idea that Shelley was well versed in the myth of the Incubus is the famous painter Henry Fuseli. Shelley's mother struck up a friendship with the artist, and there were even some rumors that the two had an affair (Voller). The young Mary was fascinated by her mother, and became familiar with the work of Fuseli. Of particular interest is his painting "The Nightmare." Completed in 1781, the painting depicts a shimmering damsel, lying supine on a seeming bridal bier, who appears to lie somewhere between life and death. Astride her chest is a villainous male demon, an incubus, who seems to be crushing her chest (Appendix). The image is very similar to that of Elizabeth, sprawled out on her bridal bed after the creature strangles her. This similarity suggests that the painting may have inspired Shelley as she imagined the climactic murder of Victor's wife. The connection between the Fuseli painting and Shelley's novel is examined by Maryanne Ward, who argues that "the melodramatic position of the body was, and is, a Gothic cliché, so that

the pose alone really is not sufficient to suggest a direct influence. But the monster in the window pointing to the body is undoubtedly a reference to the painting" (Ward 21). It is very compelling that Shelley's image of one of the most important scenes in the novel seems to have been inspired by the image of an Incubus hovering over its female victim.

The third connection between Shelley and the Incubus myth appears in her diary, as she reiterates the German ghost stories that served as inspiration for the contest. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Shelley admits in her introduction that she wanted to create a story that could rival the ghost stories that inspired it. One of those stories seems to detail the Incubus myth. In her entry for August 18th, 1816, Shelley summarizes the story of Lord Lyttleton who experiences what can easily be described as an attack by an Incubus demon:

They had been in bed about an hour, when they were awakened by the most horrible screams, which issued from the stranger's room. Everyone rushed towards it...and found the stranger stretched on the ground, writhing with agony and weltering in blood. On their entrance he arose, and collecting himself, apparently with a strong effort, entreated them to leave him; not to disturb him; that he would give every possible explanation in the morning. (Feldman, and Scott-Kilvert 128)

Certain details of the story relate directly to the accounts of Incubi attacks mentioned earlier in this paper. First, the spectators find the man stretched out on the ground, apparently thrown from his bed which is consistent with the notion that many victims of the Incubus syndrome try to do the same to alleviate the pressure on their chest. Second, the attack seems to conclude when the others enter the room. This is consistent with the Waller's explanation as to why the syndrome is so hard to study.

Finally, though he is supposedly drenched in blood, presumably a result from the fall from the bed, the companions find no evidence of an attack. Lord Lytton asks to be left alone, that he would provide some sort of explanation in the morning, which never happens because in the morning, his friends find that he has disappeared.

Finally, Mary Shelley's journal reveals that she was well versed in literature that made allusions to the demon myth. At the end of every year, Shelley provides a list of the books and poems she has read during that year, and several of these works make at least cursory references to the Incubus myth. The first is the poem *The Curse of Kehama* by Robert Southey, which Shelley read in 1814 (Feldman, and Scott-Kilvert). In the poem, a young man named Arvalanis is thwarted in his attempt to rape a young peasant girl by the name of Kailyal ("Norton Anthology of English Literature"). However, upon his death, Arvalan turns into a demon and begins to possess various priests in an attempt to finally have his way with Kailyal. The story comes from Hindu myth and while it varies in detail from the traditional Incubus myth, it does provide the image of night-time visitations by demoniacal figures. In 1815, Shelley read *Paradise Regained* by John Milton. The sequel to his classic poem *Paradise Lost* provides hope that men can regain some form of the paradise that was lost with original sin. In the poem, the serpent returns to the Garden of Eden as the antagonist to man. In book 2, he calls upon a demon by the name of Belial who tempts the virginity of women: "So spoke the old Serpent, doubting, and from all/With clamour was assured their utmost aid/At his command; when from amidst them rose/Belial, the dissolutes Spirit that fell/The sensualest, and, after Asmodai, The fleshliest Incubus, and thus advise" (Milton 147-

152). Belial is one of the fallen, the angels who rebelled against heaven and were sent to hell in *Paradise Lost*. Satan commends Belial for how he tempts and "doat'st on womankind" and even uses the term "Incubus" when summoning him. Finally, Shelley was well versed in the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose poem *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is alluded to several times in the opening letters of *Frankenstein*. However, it is in his enigmatic poem "Kubla Khan" that Coleridge seems to make reference to the presence of the Incubus demon. He refers to Xanadu as "A savage place! as holy and enchanted/As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted/By woman wailing for her demon-lover!" (Coleridge). The phrase demon-lover seems to allude to the legend of the Incubus demon. Shelley's friendship with Hogg and Polidori, along with the allusions to Incubi in the Fuseli painting and other familiar works, only serves to reinforce the notion that Mary Shelley would be well aware of the legend of the Incubus by the time she wrote her novel in 1816.

## CHAPTER IV

### MARY SHELLEY'S USE OF DEMON IMAGERY

The Incubus demon is often depicted staring down upon its sleeping victim. Throughout Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the creature is depicted in much the same way. The first time that the creature appears in the novel is in Victor's laboratory in Ingolstadt. After two years, Victor succeeds in assembling the pieces for his creation, and on a dreary night in November, brings his creature to life. He describes that "by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (Shelley 34). However, Victor is repulsed by his creation. He flees from the laboratory, abandoning the creature and retreats to his bedchamber, seeking the respite of sleep. It is hard to imagine that Victor would be able to sleep moments after experiencing the horror of his creation, but he does fall into a fitful slumber. He dreams of Elizabeth, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. However, when he embraces her in the dream, she transforms into his dead mother. The horror of the dream causes Victor to wake, and when he does, he finds the creature, looming over him:

I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch- the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me...He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped. (34-35)

First, the image of the creature standing over Victor as he lies supine on his bed is very similar to that of the Incubus demon. The creature looms over Victor, holding open the bed curtains which is same posture that Dr. Waller describes, when discussing his own experience with the Incubus syndrome. As mentioned earlier, Waller describes an encounter with what he thought was one of his patients, entering his bed chamber in the middle of the night. In his book, Waller describes his patient as “standing by my bedside holding the curtains open, expressing all that wildness in his looks” (Waller 42-43). However, when Waller woke the next day, he learned that his patient had indeed been in his cell the entire night. And while Waller is not attributing this experience to the presence of actual demons, he does name the medical affliction that he is studying after the Incubus myth. By naming this condition "The Incubus Syndrome" Waller is attributing the symptoms to a myth that his early nineteenth-century reader would identify with. In both Waller's account and in Shelley's novel, the demon figure seems to be standing over the victim as they lie on their back. In both cases, the demon figure pulls the bed curtains away and gazes down upon its victim. In both instances, the victim feels detained, just as victims of Incubi attacks feel paralyzed or restrained in their beds. Shelley even provides a possible clue in the very next paragraph when she alludes to Dante Alighieri's *The Inferno*. Victor reflects on the horror he feels upon seeing his

creation; “when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived” (35). The allusion to *The Inferno* at this critical moment of creation reinforces the image of the creature as a demon, even if it was indeed more hideous than the ones Dante describes.

Later in the text, Shelley provides the reader with yet another demonic image as the creature narrates his interaction with Justine Moritz. The creature admits to killing Victor’s brother William in a fit of anger. Afterwards, the creature seeks shelter in a barn, and it is there that he comes upon the young Justine Moritz. Justine is a close friend and ward of the Frankenstein family, and after spending the evening searching for young William, she finds herself locked out of town. She is forced to sleep in a barn, and it is there that the creature comes upon her. In the original 1818 text, the creature approaches Justine with a very pragmatic purpose as he places the locket upon her simply to frame her for William's murder. However, in the 1831 revised version, Shelley provides a sexual dynamic as the creature stands over young Justine, seemingly lusting over her. The creature describes:

A woman was sleeping on some straw; she was young: not indeed so beautiful as her whose portrait I held; but of an agreeable aspect, and blooming in the loveliness of youth and health. Here, I thought, is one of those whose joy-imparting smiles are bestowed on all but me. And then I bent over her, and whispered, ‘Awake, fairest, thy lover is near.’ (127)

This sexual imagery in the later text reinforces the Incubus demon connection. The creature looms over the young woman, referring to himself as "her lover" in much the same way an Incubus demon would. And while the creature does not end up touching the young Justine, he does place a locket that he found on the body of William in her

pocket. The monster frames Justine, as the locket is the evidence that later in the novel leads to Justine being blamed and executed for the murder of young William. However, lockets are often love tokens as well. The monster visits young Justine as she sleeps, leaves the token, and then leaves without her ever knowing he was there. The fact that the monster never actually touches young Justine reflects the changing nature of the Incubus myth during this time. As the Waller text illustrates, scholars during Shelley's time considered the demon to be more of a hallucination than an actual physical entity that stalked its victims in the night.

Towards the end of the novel, Mary Shelley provides the reader with one more image of the monster that is reminiscent of the Incubus demon. After Victor refuses to create a mate for his creation, the creature vows to visit Victor on his wedding night. Victor assumes that the creature means to attack him, so after the wedding, he sends Elizabeth to the room while he searches for the monster. However, the monster takes his revenge by attacking and killing Elizabeth on her bridal bed. Victor rushes into the room to find the body of his wife. Victor describes her as "lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair. Every where I turn I see the same figure – her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier" (135-136). This is the first time in the novel that the monster strangles a woman. The reader is presented with the image of the monster as a demon, who visits Elizabeth in the night, suffocates her and leaves before there are any other witnesses. According to Waller, studying the syndrome is difficult because the fits seem to come to an end the moment another person enters



the room. This was particularly significant during medieval times, when victims believed that they were being attacked by a corporal demon. Their sanity was questioned because there were no witnesses to the presence of the demon. When Victor and the other inhabitants of the inn enter the room, there is no trace of the eight-foot phantasm that Victor created. The fact that the monster visits Elizabeth and leaves without a trace or witness reinforces the connection between Victor's creation and the Incubus demon. And while the monster does not physically rape Elizabeth, the fact that he visits her on her wedding night, on her wedding bed and steals her life on the night that she was to consummate her marriage reflects the same loss of sexual power that victims of rape suffer from.

There are also moments in the text where Mary Shelley depicts Victor as a victim of an Incubus attack. After creating his monster, Victor exhibits some curious physical ailments which may reinforce this image. He suffers from what he describes as "fits and fevers" some of which last considerable amount of time. Victor suffers one of these fits when Henry arrives in Ingolstadt; "Poor Clerval! What must have been his feelings?...But I was not the witness of his grief; for I was lifeless, and did not recover my senses for a long, long time. This was the commencement of a nervous fever, which confined me for several months" (37). As Dr. Bond writes in 1753, victims of the Incubus Syndrome suffer from "violent passions of the mind that produce fevers, fainting fits, and other severe effects on the body" (Bond 22). Victor continues throughout the text to suffer from the recurring fevers which leave him unconscious for long periods of time. When he visits the site of his brother's murder, Victor remembers these episodes and admits

that they cause him to question his sanity in much the same manner as victims who experience what they perceive to be the visitations of night demons. He describes a "nervous fever with which I had been seized just at the time that I dated my creation, and which would give an air of delirium to a tale otherwise so utterly improbable" (49). Later in the text, Victor's father Alphonse witnesses some of Victor's fevers, but does not understand their cause:

My father saw this change with pleasure and he turned his thoughts towards the best method of eradicating the remains of my melancholy, which every now and then would return by fits, and with a devouring blackness overcast the approaching sunshine. (103)

Witnesses to episodes of Incubi encounters would also struggle to understand and the actual cause. Later in the text, Victor is accused of the murder of his best friend, Henry Clerval. While being held by the magistrate Victor suffers another one of his fevers and openly questions his own sanity: "I sometimes doubted if indeed it were all true, for it never presented itself to my mind with the force of reality" (123). The desperate tone exhibited by Victor at this point in the novel reflects Victor's internal conflict as he questions his own reality in much the same way as victims of the Incubus Syndrome. While Victor is haunted by the presence of his creature, others question his sanity. After the murder of Elizabeth, Victor and the other inhabitants of the inn go in search of the monster, but do not find him. In response, they question the validity of Victor's visions. Upon returning from the search, Victor reflects "we returned hopeless, most of my companions believing it to have been a form conjured by my fancy" (136). As mentioned earlier in the paper, only the actual victims of the Incubi attacks see their attackers. They often then question their own sanity. If a nineteenth-century reader was indeed as

well-versed in the demon lover tradition as Waller's treatise might suggest, then the subtle image of Victor, reacting to the creature in much the same way a victim might during an Incubus attack may serve to reinforce the image of the monster as an Incubus.

## CHAPTER V

### STRANGULATION AND SUFFOCATION

The myth of the Incubus suggests that the demon would strangle or suffocate its victims in much the same way that Mary Shelley's monster suffocates his victims. As previously mentioned, victims of the Incubus syndrome wake in a panic, feeling as if some sort of weight is crushing or suffocating them. They struggle for air, and often have to throw themselves physically from their beds to alleviate the pressure. The creature kills his victims in much the same way. In his letter to Victor, Alphonse describes the discovery of William, the first victim of the monster's rage: "About five in the morning I discovered my lovely boy, whom the night before I had seen blooming and active in health, stretched on the grass livid and motionless: the print of the murderer's finger was on his neck" (45). These fingerprints, which appear on each of the victims in the novel, serve as a chilling reminder to Victor of the awesome power the monster holds over him. All three of the victims were known to be strangled, which again supports the image of the monster as a night demon. And throughout the text, when Victor is overwhelmed by fear, he imagines the monster's hands around his own

neck: "'Do not ask me,' cried I, putting my hands before my eyes, for I thought I saw the dreaded spectre glide into the room...I imagined that the monster seized me; I struggled furiously, and fell down in a fit" (37). Here, in the presence of his good friend Henry Clerval, Victor's internal conflict manifests itself physically. Henry does not see the creature and therefore is unable to understand the actions of his guilt-ridden friend. Like victims of the Incubus syndrome, Victor suffers repeated episodes during which he imagines the attack of some corporal demon. Later, after Victor learns of the death of Clerval, he is detained by the town magistrate Mr. Kirwin, who believes Victor to be the culprit. While being detained, Victor suffers from another one of his fevers:

A fever succeeded to this. I lay for two months on the point of death: my ravings, as I afterwards heard, were frightful; I called myself the murderer of William, of Justine, and of Clerval. Sometimes I entreated my attendants to assist me in the destruction of the fiend by whom I was tormented; and, at others, I felt the fingers of the monster already grasping my neck, and screamed aloud with agony and terror...my gestures and bitter cries were sufficient to affright the other witnesses. (122)

Here again, Victor finds himself in a fitful sleep, struggling to wake from his two-month fever and experiencing the sensation of being strangled. He begs his attendants to help him destroy a fiend that only he can see. And while Mr. Kirwin and the others witness this behavior, and attribute it to a murderer's guilt, not one understands or witnesses any physical presence of a demon. Despite Victor's ramblings, the magistrate finds no evidence that links Victor to the murder and is forced to release him. Shortly after being released by Mr. Kirwin into the custody of his father, Victor describes an episode that is eerily similar to the ones described by victims of Incubus attacks: "Towards morning I was possessed by a kind of night-mare; I felt the fiend's grasp in my neck, and could not

free myself from it; groans and cries rung in my ears. My father, who was watching over me, perceiving my restlessness awoke me" (128). Here, Shelley uses the same phrasing as Dr. Waller, when describing the encounter with the demon as a "night-mare." Dr. Waller suggests that the attacks end when another person enters the room in much the same manner as Victor's attack is brought to an end by the prodding of his father. When Victor wakes, the monster is not there. Victor feels suffocated and confined in much the same manner as those who suffer from the Incubus visitations, and Victor admits to being 'restless' just like those victims who struggle to throw the perceived weight of some demon from their chest.

Later in the text, Victor again refers to feeling confined, even suffocated by the presence of the creature. Shortly after destroying the creature's bride, Victor confines himself in his apartment out of fear. He recalls that he was "overcome by the sensation of helplessness, so often felt in frightful dreams, when you in vain endeavour to fly from the impending danger, and was rooted to the spot" (115). As Dr. Waller suggests that "it is by no means an uncommon thing for the person {...} to see, or at least to imagine that he sees, some figure, either human, or otherwise, standing by him, threatening him, or deriding, or oppressing him" (Waller 26). This suggests that it would not be uncommon for Victor, as a possible victim of a Incubus syndrome, to perceive some 'impending danger' and feel threatened by it. Mary Shelley reinforces the image of Victor as the victim of an Incubus attack in these passages. Victor often describes his visions of the creature as he lies in one of his fits or fevers. He feels immobilized, and fears that he will suffocate like the victims described in Dr. Waller's book. He describes his creation as an

eight-foot creature. Yet this same creature is able to sneak into Elizabeth's chamber without being noticed. Despite the size and appearance of the creature, only Robert Walton seems to be able to corroborate its existence. Mary Shelley's creature confines and suffocates its victims, most notably its creator, in much the same manner the Incubus demon from myth.

CHAPTER VI  
DREAM STATE RECURRENCES

Dr. Waller suggests that victims of the Incubus Syndrome experience the episodes repeatedly, and come to dread them while they sleep. In much the same way, Victor often describes his encounters with the monster while in a sort of dream state. As the monster starts to enact its revenge upon Victor for his abandonment, Victor begins to dread the terrors of the night. Shortly after returning to Geneva after the murder of his brother, Victor reflects that "no one can conceive the anguish I suffered during the remainder of the night" (49). Because the Incubus demon visits its victims in the moments of transition between sleeping and waking, the victims often have a hard time believing in the reality of the episodes. They suffer repeated attacks which, as Dr. Waller points out, make it difficult for them to assume that they were dreaming. Yet, when they wake, their attacker is gone and their friends can not testify but that they were alone. Victor often experiences episodes with the monster while in a dream-like state and struggles to believe in the authenticity of the attacks. As mentioned earlier, Victor's first encounter with the monster occurs shortly after bringing it to life. He lies in bed, dreaming of Elizabeth and as he wakes, he sees the monster standing over him. Just like victims of the Incubus Syndrome, Victor wakes from a dream state and experiences the demon in the transition between being asleep and being awake. The next morning, Victor reflects on the terrifying nature of his dreams; "Dreams that had been my food and pleasant rest for so long a space were now become a hell to me" (35). Victor has



come to fear and despise his dreams in much the same manner as a victim of the Incubus syndrome. When Henry Clerval arrives in Ingolstadt and begins to care for the ailing Victor, he too witnesses the strange ailment that his friend suffers from. Victor explains that:

The form of the monster on whom I had bestowed existence was ever before my eyes, and I raved incessantly concerning him. Doubtless my words surprised Henry: he at first believed them to be the wanderings of my disturbed imagination; but the pertinacity with which I continually recurred to the same subject persuaded him that my disorder indeed owed its origin to some uncommon and terrible event. (38)

Throughout the text, Victor's fear and frustration is compounded by the fact that no other person witnesses the monster. The fact that the monster was "ever before my eyes" reinforces the repetitive nature of these dream like episodes. Clerval attributes these attacks to some traumatic event, which may serve as a cause of the Incubus Syndrome in the first place. After the death of Henry Clerval, Victor continues to make reference to the traumatic events of his life appearing to him in a dream state: "The past appeared to me in the light of a frightful dream...and the sea which surrounded me, told me too forcibly that I was deceived by no vision" (127). Victor is struggling with the guilt over the loss of his friend, and needs the presence of nature to convince him that what he is experiencing is real. Just like victims of the Incubus Syndrome, Victor is struggling to understand what is real, and what is simply a vision.

As the novel comes to a close, Shelley provides her reader with one more demoniacal image of the creature. As he leaves Geneva, seeking revenge on the monster, Victor swears an oath to the spirits of the night.

I knelt on the grass, and kissed the earth, and with quivering lips exclaimed, 'By the sacred earth on which I kneel, by the shades that wander near me, by the deep and eternal grief that I feel, I swear; and by thee, O Night, and by the spirits that preside over thee, I swear to pursue the daemon.' (140)

Victor invokes the spirits of the night and even refers to the creature by the term daemon, both of which suggest the image of night-demons in this novel. In fact, Victor refers to the monster as "daemon" fifteen times in the novel. Victor's oath is quickly answered by the disembodied voice of his daemon:

I was answered through the stillness of night by a loud and fiendish laugh. It rung on my ears long and heavily...I felt as if all hell surrounded me with mockery and laughter...The laughter died away, when a well-known and abhorred voice, apparently close to my ear, addressed me in an audible whisper - 'I am satisfied: miserable wretch!' (141)

The fact that this voice is "close to his ear" suggests that its origin is inside his own mind. The idea that the creature is a manifestation of Victor's own internal conflict reflects the Incubus Syndrome, as the victim suffers from great emotional trauma and perceives some attacker, visiting them in the night.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSIONS

It was not uncommon for romantic writers like Shelley to allude to the presence of demons in their writing. Her fascination with her mother would have undoubtedly led her to Henry Fuseli's "The Nightmare." She spent the summer of 1816 with her friends, including Dr. John Polidori, whose studies into sleepwalking would have most likely exposed him to the same Incubus syndrome that Dr. Waller describes in that same year. Shelley admits in her introduction to the 1831 version of the novel that she was greatly inspired by a series of German ghost stories, one of which seems to allude to the myth of the Incubus. She also readily makes use of the Satan character from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Even Milton, in *Paradise Regained* makes use of the Incubus legend. Given these circumstances, it seems hard to imagine that Shelley was not at least aware of the demon-lover tradition when she wrote her epic novel.

By closely examining the myth of the Incubus, it seems clear that Victor's creature shares certain traits with the demon. They both appear, standing over and oppressing their victims who lie in a supine position. Victor often describes his

encounters with the creature as if they were a dream, in much the same manner as victims of the Incubus syndrome who perceive the visitations of some night demon while they sleep. Victor often describes feeling confined by the presence of the monster, in much the same manner as those who experience what they believe to be the Incubus demon. And in both cases, the oppressor seems to vanish before witnesses can confirm its presence. It seems hard to ignore the apparent connection between Victor's creation and the legend of the Incubus demon, a connection that may suggest some interesting implications for Shelley's readership. Shelley's use of the Incubus legend reveals a certain nineteenth-century fascination demon mythology. It is this same fascination that allows her readers to recognize the explicit allusions to Milton's Satan. It is this same fascination that is reflected in the title of Dr. Waller's book, who when describing a purely medical phenomenon, employs the legend that his patients would likely understand. For an early nineteenth-century reader, who had likely no recourse to fully understand the implications of man's meddling in science, Shelley provides the image of demons, spawned from the minds of ambitious and sinful men, who then destroy their creators. It is not the unknown implications of unchecked science that haunted Shelley's reader, but the fundamental fear that men, when attempting to circumvent the laws of nature and embellish their own sense of divinity, are capable of creating demons, much like those that haunt their own nightmares.

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Appendix A: Henry Fuseli "The Nightmare" 1781

