

*Literature Insights*  
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# Mary Shelley *Frankenstein*

Essaka Joshua

*‘I felt what  
the duties  
of a creator  
towards his  
creature were’*

# PUBLICATION DATA

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## A Note on the Author

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Essaka Joshua took her BA and MA at Oxford University and her PhD at the University of Birmingham, where she is now a lecturer in the department of English. She has published several articles on Romantic and Victorian literature, including studies of Mary Shelley, William Wordsworth, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Charlotte Brontë, Charlotte Smith, and George Bernard Shaw. Dr Joshua is the author of *Pygmalion and Galatea: The History of a Narrative in English Literature* (Ashgate, 2001), and a textbook on *The Remains of the Day* (First and Best, 2004). Her book *The Romantics and the May Day Tradition* is forthcoming (Ashgate, 2007), and she is currently working on a British Academy funded study of the cultural and academic significance of Göttingen University in the 1820s.

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# Part 1: Life, Times, Contexts and Themes

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## 1.1 Biography and Literary Career

Mary Shelley was born Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin on 30 August 1797 in London, the daughter of two of the most important radical writers of the late eighteenth century. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), wrote the landmark feminist work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which argues for the moral and practical value of educating women. Mary did not know her mother, who died a few days after giving birth to her. Her father, the political philosopher William Godwin (1756–1836), is now best known for his novel *Caleb Williams* (1794), which has important similarities to *Frankenstein*, and also for his political study *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) which asserts the importance of equality and social change stopping short of revolution. *Political Justice* was extremely influential not only on his daughter but also on many important writers of the time, like the ‘Lake Poets’, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth and Robert Southey.

Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin were an unorthodox couple. Theirs was an age of revolution: France and Britain were at war and the French Revolution, the ideas of which they supported, thundered through Europe changing societies, morals and lives. Godwin had well-publicised (and, to some, scandalous) views against the institution of marriage, maintaining that it forced women into dependence on men and to rely, for their survival, on the generosity of their husbands and male relatives. Wollstonecraft was of the same opinion, suggesting that marriage was a form of slavery which oppressed women. So they themselves flouted convention by not marrying until after Mary was pregnant. Nevertheless, the pressures of society were such that they felt the need to conform to protect Wollstonecraft’s reputation. The couple compromised with a form of marriage that allowed them to keep the independence they had been used to when single, but whether this would have worked will never be known, as five months later Wollstonecraft died. In spite of Godwin’s heart-felt biography of his late wife, her reputation suffered nonetheless, and her name was synonymous with disgrace for over a hundred years after her death.