Frankenstein empirically stands as a very diverse reading where application of critical literary theory is concerned. An interesting approach to the text that involves analysis of the birth and death connection forms from trauma theory. Trauma in Frankenstein solidifies through the style of narration. However, since the narrative is largely told through three retrospective points of view the main focus settles within the examination of traumatic memory specifically that of the creature. The transcendence of the Mary Shelley’s traumatic memory into the narrative constructs a parallel which this examination helps to illuminate.

Trauma, like any psychoanalytic lens, offers a wide range of possible approaches to literature. The author of Graphic Women, Hillary Chute, provides extensive applications of traumatic memory to graphic narratives. Her focus may be aimed toward the format of sequential art, but her underlying ideas are not restricted to that form alone. Application of Chute’s “traumatic memory” ideas over the creature’s and Mary Shelly’s birth cultivates a revealing examination of a psychological connection between character and author.

The materialization of the creature’s traumatic memory surfaces at the start of his narrative. “It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original æra of my being: all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct.” (Shelley 70). Beyond the several levels of unreliable narrators, the creature himself admits to the faultiness of his own memory. His narrative starts sometime after his creation. A deliberate gap between Victor giving the creature life and the creature’s recounting narration alludes to the trauma of creation which he underwent. Beginning his narrative in the woods outside of Ingolstadt instead of at the moment of the “spark of being” (Shelley 35), the creature may have forgotten the trauma of his creation but not completely. As Hillary Chute points out, “[…] the seeming paradox of traumatic memory, in which people “forget” trauma, but do not “forget” it enough (while these memories may no longer be verbal, they yet drive behavior).” (Chute 114) the creature’s traumatic memories are hidden but influential. The traumatic memory of the creature’s genesis isn’t lost in the beginning chapters of his narrative as much as it is not directly remembered. The creature was born to a withered and obsessed Victor, and once alive was rejected because of his hideousness (Shelley 35-36). Coming into existence, for the creature, was an atrocious incident of traumatization. Although his narrative reveals no record of this rejection and abandonment, the “forgotten” trauma still resides within him and offers explanations for his later conflicting actions.

The influence of the repressed traumatic memory begins to expel itself from the creature while he reads Victor’s notes about the creation. “Everything is related in them which bears reference to my accursed origin; the whole detail of that series of disgusting circumstances which produced it is set into view […]” (Shelley 91). When the creature begins to unravel the traumatic memory imposing on his morality, he starts to assemble what Lenore Terr deems “spatial
sense” through reading Victor’s papers. She explains that “[...] repressed memory can be retrieved by visual cues, and how place, more than anything else, remains attached to highly emotional episodic memory” (Terr 53,73). Until the creature could recount the “space” in which his creation occurred, the traumatic memories would continue to elude him. The creature starts to remember fragments of the moment he was given life. “I sickened as I read. ‘Hateful day when I received life!’ I exclaimed in agony. ‘Cursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust?” (Shelley 91). Spatial recognition triggered the creature’s engagement on a path towards violence.

The traumatic experience of his creation was overwhelming and facilitated the psychological environment in which William was murdered. The initially meant no harm to William but yearned for acceptance. When William invoked the spatial recognition of the creation scene shouting, “monster! ugly wretch!” (Shelley 100) the repressed memories violently ravaged the creature. Unable to cope with the traumatic memory the creature attempted to stop the recollection. “I grasped his throat to silence him, and in a moment he lay dead at my feet.” (Shelley 100). The creature’s intentions were not violent until the traumatic memory was triggered. In an attempt to simply repress the spatial recognition, the creature killed William. The connection of death and birth illuminates when William dies. The creature reflects on the experience of creating death. “I exclaimed, ‘I, too, can create desolation; my enemy is not impregnable; this death will carry despair to him, and a thousand other miseries shall torment and destroy him.”’ (Shelley 100). As Victor gave life to the creature, the creature gave death to William. And the theme of birth as death was solidified.

It is in this theme that the parallel of traumatic memory between the creature and Mary Shelley reaches visibility. The author’s own trauma transcends into the narrative. “Not only did her mother die in bearing Mary herself—dramatic enough in itself to emblazon on her consciousness a continuing emotional association of birth and death—but a number of other deaths rudely intruded on Mary’s early life before she came to write Frankenstein” (Hunter xv). Mary Shelley most likely experienced her mother’s death much like Walton experienced the creature’s story as it was told through someone else. Although she had no first person recollection of her mother dying, she probably experienced fragmentation of the traumatic event as others, her father mainly, explained it to her. As Chute explains “[...] placing themselves in a space, authors may forcefully convey the shifting layers of memory and create a peculiar entry point for representing experience.” (Chute 114), Mary Shelley may have created “space” within the confines of the creature’s narrative in order to expel some of the traumatic memory she had repressed. The “shifting layers of memory” that Chute discusses are executed by Mary Shelley in the layering of narratives. As one narrator passes on another’s narrative, the memories slightly change creating the unreliable nature. Much like the creature, Mary Shelly’s birth caused death and “desolation” of her creator.

Although there are several approaches to demystifying the link between birth and death within Frankenstein, the examination of traumatic memory helps to discover the more psychological side of the parallel delving in to the relationship between author and character, both of whom experience the
link between birth and death. The creature evokes inner trauma that Mary Shelley may have struggled with. Although her memories were private, *Frankenstein* offers a great example of how an author’s psychological joining with a character can express even his or her most repressed traumatic memories.

**Works Cited**


