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## Original Articles

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# The Westermarck Trap: A Possible Factor in the Creation of *Frankenstein*

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When children affected by the "Westermarck effect" are expected to marry each other, like those in Taiwan described by Wolf and Huang (1980), we may speak of the "Westermarck trap." Students of the Westermarck effect may be interested to know that this trap is depicted in the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, in which Victor Frankenstein is expected to marry a cousin reared with him. Instead, he creates a monster that persecutes him and murders his prospective bride before the marriage can be consummated. It is suggested that the plot owes something to Mary Shelley's own experience of the Westermarck effect, following a childhood in which she was reared with a stepbrother. Her own personal solution was not to create a monster but to elope with a married man (Percy Bysshe Shelley) at the age of 16.

**KEY WORDS:** Incest taboo; Westermarck effect; Mary Shelley; Frankenstein; Familial bonding.

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### INTRODUCTION

Over a century ago, Edward Westermarck (1891) gathered evidence concerning the mutual sexual indifference of people brought up as "house-mates." He wrote:

Generally speaking, there is a remarkable absence of erotic feelings between persons living very closely together from childhood. Nay more, in this, as in many other cases, sexual indifference is combined with the positive feeling of aversion when the act is thought of. This I take to be the fundamental cause of the exogamous prohibitions. Persons who have been living closely together from childhood are as a rule near relatives. Hence their aversion to sexual rela-

Received October 27, 1994; revised January 11, 1995.

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Ethology and Sociobiology 16: 349-353 (1995)  
© Elsevier Science Inc., 1995  
655 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10010

0162-3095/95/\$9.50  
SSDI 0162-3095(95)00056-Q

tions with one another displays itself in custom and law as a prohibition of intercourse between near kin.

He pointed out that in cultures in which married sons live with their parents it is usual for marriage to be prohibited between cousins whose fathers are brothers, whereas cousins related through the female line (who are brought up in separate households) are permitted to marry. This aversion to sexual feelings between those brought up together has become known as the "Westermarck effect."

Wolf and Huang (1980) described the "minor marriages" in Taiwan, in which children are affianced in infancy, and the prospective bride is brought to live in the boy's household at a very early age, so that the prospective marriage partners are virtually brought up as brother and sister; in adult life these couples are more likely to suffer from broken marriages and reduced fertility. In such cases, the Westermarck effect could be called the Westermarck trap, because through one channel of influence the parents insist that their child mate with a certain person, but through another channel of influence (bringing the girl to live in their home as a baby) they make it impossible (or at least difficult) for their child to mate with that person.

I should like to describe an example of this phenomenon that is depicted in the novel *Frankenstein, or the New Prometheus* by Mary Shelley (first published 1818; revised edition 1831; quotations taken from edition by M.K. Joseph, Oxford University Press, 1969).

### THE PLOT OF *FRANKENSTEIN*

The novel has a Chinese box or Russian doll design. In the outer layer, a traveller Robert Walton, who is searching for a passage to the supposed warm sea at the North Pole, describes his adventures in a series of letters to his sister back in England. Walton rescues Victor Frankenstein, who is then chasing the monster across the ice. Frankenstein describes to Walton the creation of the monster and his subsequent dealings with it, including a long passage in which the monster describes to Frankenstein the events that followed its creation.

Victor Frankenstein (he relates to Robert Walton) was the son of a nobleman of Geneva. He was only "about five" when his father brought into the home a girl of the same age called Elizabeth. It was the "dearest wish" of his parents that Victor should marry Elizabeth, but although the two young people showed every evidence of familial bonding, there was no spark of romance or sexual attraction between them. Nevertheless, they were engaged to be married by the time of his mother's death, when she "commends the girl to take her place."

At university Victor studies natural science and becomes interested in the creation of life. "He fashions a gigantic man out of dead tissues and animates the creature with an electrical spark, but is instantly revolted by the grotesque being he has created and wished it were dead" (Myers 1982/3). He abandons the creature and has a nervous breakdown, and then returns home when he hears that his younger brother William has been murdered. He discovers that his creature has committed the murder and implicated an innocent girl, who is executed.

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When Victor shows evidence of depression, his father suspects that he might be having a problem with the prospect of marriage to his foster sister, and addresses his son as follows (Shelley 1969, p. 150):

I confess, my son, that I have always looked forward to your marriage with our dear Elizabeth, as the tie of our domestic comfort, and the stay of my declining years. You were attached to each other from the earliest infancy: you studied together, and appeared, in dispositions and tastes, entirely suited to one another. But so blind is the experience of man, that what I conceived to be the best assistants to my plan, may have entirely destroyed it. You perhaps, regard her as your sister, without any wish that she might become your wife. Nay, you may have met with another whom you may love, and considering yourself bound in honour to Elizabeth, this struggle may occasion the poignant misery which you appear to feel.

Victor, perhaps not the most insightful of fictional characters, denies any impediment to his forthcoming marriage:

My dear father, re-assure yourself. I love my cousin tenderly and sincerely. I never saw any woman who excited, as Elizabeth does, my warmest admiration and affection. My future hopes and prospects are entirely bound up in the expectation of our union.

Then, at the top of an Alpine glacier, he once again meets the monster who gives him a detailed account of his life, and how he managed to educate himself in spite of a total absence of care from his creator. He tells Victor how everyone recoils from his ugliness, and he makes Victor pity him to such an extent that Victor agrees to his request to create a female monster to provide a mate for him. However, having almost completed the female creature, Victor changes his mind and destroys her. The monster promises to be with Victor and his bride on their wedding night.

As the wedding approaches, Victor's confidence in the match lessens (Shelley 1969, p. 191):

As the period fixed for our marriage drew nearer, whether from cowardice or a prophetic feeling, I felt my heart sink within me. But I concealed my feelings by an appearance of hilarity.

Four pages later Victor marries Elizabeth, but the marriage is not consummated. On their wedding night he sends her up to bed but does not join her. Instead he paces up and down searching for the monster, when he hears a shriek and finds his bride lying murdered on her bed.

He then chases the monster across Europe, finally following him onto the polar ice cap, where he meets Robert Walton, to whom he relates his life story and then dies. The monster then expresses guilt to Walton about his creator's death and promises to immolate himself in atonement.

## THE SIBLING INCEST THEME

In the novel, Elizabeth and Victor were brought up together in the same household from the age of four onwards. In the first (1818) edition of the novel, Elizabeth

was an orphaned cousin, but in the revised edition of 1831, the author converted her into an unrelated person.

An exchange of letters between brother and sister is the outer shell of the novel. It may be significant that Mary Shelley depicts a brother setting off far into the polar wastes in search of a sea route to the North Pole, leaving his sister back home, thus eliminating any possibility of sexual bonding between them; and at the same time he writes to the sister detailed letters about his travels, demonstrating the strength of familial bonding between them. This safe sibling relationship in the shell of the novel contrasts with the predicament of Victor and his foster sister, who are expected to achieve sexual consummation but fail to do so.

How could this sophisticated portrayal be accomplished by Mary Shelley at the age of 18? Here we should look at the childhood of Mary Shelley, well documented in the letters and journals of her family.

### THE CHILDHOOD OF MARY SHELLEY

Mary was born in August, 1797. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died of sepsis some ten days after young Mary's birth. Then, when she was three and a half, Mary's father married a widow, Mary Jane Clairmont, who had two children, Charles, aged five, and Claire, who was the same age as Mary. Although there is no evidence that any parental pressure was put on Mary and Charles to marry, it may have been her own wonder at her lack of sexual attraction to Charles that gave her an intuitive understanding of the Westermarck effect, and her fantasies of what might happen if she were required to marry Charles that gave her an insight into the dangers of the Westermarck trap; and possibly that led her to escape from the trap herself by flouting all convention and eloping with Percy Bysshe Shelley (then a married man) at the age of 16.

### CONCLUSION

The novel *Frankenstein* has been the subject of much comment in the psychiatric literature, and suggestions of mother/child and father/child incest have been noted (Baudry 1982/3; Myers, 1982/3). It may be of interest that Mary Shelley's second novel *Mathilda* (edited by Elizabeth Nitchie, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969) is based on father/daughter incest and that at the same time her husband was dealing with the same theme, *The Cenci*.

The Westermarck effect is a subject of increasing scientific interest (Bevc and Silverman 1993; Erickson 1993, 1994; McCabe 1983; Shepher 1983; Wolf 1993, in press). The present note draws attention to the possibility of psychopathological development when the sexual instinct is caught, between the Westermarck effect and parental injunctions to marry, in what might be called the Westermarck trap. It also suggests the value of examining material such as literature and biographies in considering sociobiological hypotheses.

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