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## Women as the Submissive Sex in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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### Abstract

I'm not the first to observe the irony that Mary Shelley, daughter of important early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, wrote a novel in which all the female characters are passive conduits for male action. A survey: invisible Margaret, Robert Walton's sister, whom the reader inhabits to receive the story through Robert's letters; Caroline Beaufort, Victor's angelic mother, whose "firmest hopes for future happiness" were in the prospect of Victor's marriage to Elizabeth—fair, pure, eternally patient and understanding Elizabeth, who later must die by the monster on her wedding night. Then there is Justine Moritz, also lovely and sweet, also used as a weapon of revenge on Victor by the monster; there are Agatha and Safie, whose stories are nestled in and de-centered by the stories of the men in their lives, and whose virtues and learning only further the monster's education; and, finally, there is the aborted female monster, a demoniacal Eve, conceived of as a companion whose presence will transform the monster and solve all his problems. But it would be a mistake to dismiss *Frankenstein* on this basis, just as it would to minimize it. Instead, I read Shelley's lack of fully-fleshed female characters with their own inner lives and motivators as a conscious and deliberate authorial choice that serves to demonstrate and warn against the consequences of dangerously arrogant and typically masculine scientific hubris. Shelley isn't casting her women characters in tired roles so much as she is using them as symbols of traditional ideals of femininity: beauty, innocence, virtue. These traits are the perfect foil to the horror, violence, and tragedy spurred by Victor's reckless ambition.

**Keywords:** - Women, Submissive, feminine, Culture and Monster.

### Introduction:-

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the author characterizes each woman as passive, disposable and serving a utilitarian function. Female characters like Safie, Elizabeth, Justine, Margaret and Agatha provide nothing more but a channel of action for the male characters in the novel. Events and actions happen to them, usually for the sake of teaching a male character a lesson or sparking an emotion within him. Each of Shelley's women serves a very specific purpose in *Frankenstein*.

First, Justine's character is a very passive, seldom vocal character in the novel. She is tossed back and forth between her family and the Frankenstein's, until she is ultimately framed for the murder of William Frankenstein. Justine defies the expectations of one wrongfully accused of manslaughter, remaining tranquil and peaceful. In her own words, she explains

*“God knows how entirely I am innocent. But I do not pretend that my protestations should acquit me; I rest my innocence on a plain and simple explanation of the facts...”*

Not only do her speech and actions demonstrate passivity, but the simple act of being framed proves this to be the purpose behind her character: “But I have no power of explaining it...I am only left to conjecture concerning the probabilities by which it might have been placed in my pocket” . Thus, Justine becomes an inactive, docile victim of circumstance.

The next female character encountered is the young cottager’s daughter Agatha, whom the monster studies. Agatha’s purpose, as a kind and gentle female, is to exhibit and embody all virtue and sensitivity. These are the first lessons learned by the monster; he has never seen such tenderness before now. Agatha most moves him in her interactions with her blind father:

*“Agatha listened with respect, her eyes sometimes filled with tears, which she endeavored to wipe away unperceived”.*

Agatha’s female character, through its inactive and tender nature, serves to teach the monster his first lessons on healthy human relationships and love.

The monster’s next lesson comes from another female close to Agatha. When Safie arrives at the cottagers’ from Arabia, she must be tutored to learn English. As the monster continues his observances of the happy family, Safie’s lessons become his own as well. Thus, because of a passive female, the monster’s first academic education results:

*“My days were spent in close attention...and I may boast that I improved more rapidly than the Arabian...I could imitate almost every word that was spoken...I also learned the science of letters”.*

It is inconsequential to the novel whether Safie herself learns the language, as long as the lessons being taught to her are influencing and furthering the monster. She is a means to his educational end, becoming yet another passive, action-channeling female character.

Perhaps the most important emotional channel in the novel is Frankenstein’s betrothed Elizabeth. Described as a submissive, gentle character from the beginning, Elizabeth has always been a soft spot for her fiancée. Frankenstein views her as a possession: “I looked upon Elizabeth as mine - mine to protect, love and cherish. All praises bestowed on her I received as made to a possession of my own”.

Frankenstein’s monster, well aware of this weakness and filled with the madness that results from parental neglect, murders Elizabeth in order to hurt his creator as deeply as possible. Even when her life is threatened, however, Frankenstein still holds the game of wits between himself and his monster above protecting Elizabeth. Instead of staying with her and guarding her on his wedding night, he patrols the premises:

*“She left me, and I continued some time walking up and down the passages of the house and inspecting every corner that might afford a retreat to my adversary...when suddenly I heard a shrill and dreadful scream”.*

Elizabeth has become another inert victim in this game of insanity and male-centered mayhem. She has been demeaned and reduced to a simple tool of revenge, along with the other female characters appearing in *Frankenstein*.

Lastly, Margaret's character has perhaps the most passive role of all. She is useful to us as an audience because without her, there is no reason for Walton to relay his story. Yet, we never meet this character nor do we know if she really exists, if she ever reads the story and gets the letters, or if she has anything to say about it. She is the most distant and passive female character in the novel and also the most necessary to the novel as a whole.

Though all of the female characters mentioned were created by a female author, each of them has a very demeaning characterization. Shelley's women are objectified, used, abused, and easily discarded. None of them, save Margaret, survive the novel and all of them live their fictional lives to serve a very specific function and impact a man's life.

### **Conclusion:-**

It is easy to point to the novel's structure—a Russian nesting doll of stories, all told by men—and say that women are denied perspective. But it's too simplistic to argue that *Frankenstein* is a story in which women are flattened and silenced and victimized, contained within men's accounts of their own experiences. To make that assumption is to ignore the threat and power of the female monster, which disrupts a surface reading of Shelley's female characters. And, while I'd normally be reticent to argue that an author's gender excuses her from fault, Shelley's background and intellect make it difficult to accept that same surface reading. After all, the real creator isn't Victor, it's Shelley—and *Frankenstein* is her monster. It not only portrays the penalties of violating Nature but also celebrates an all-creating Nature that is loved and revered by human beings. Those characters capable of feeling the beauties of Nature are rewarded with physical and mental health. Henry Clerval's relationship to Nature, for example, represents one moral touchstone in the novel. Because he "loved with ardour" "the scenery of external nature", he is endowed with a generous sympathy, a vivid imagination, a sensitive intelligence, and an unbounded capacity for devoted friendship. And it is no accident that the only member of the Frankenstein family still alive at the end of the novel is Ernest, who rejects the career of lawyer to become instead a farmer, one who must live in harmony and cooperation with the forces of Nature, one who lives "a very healthy happy life; and ... the most beneficial profession of any"

As *Frankenstein* finally shows, an unbothered child, like a scientific experiment that is performed without consideration of its probable or even its unintended results and that radically changes the natural order, can become a monster, one capable of destroying its maker. The novel implicitly endorses instead a science that seeks to understand rather than to change the workings of Mother Nature. Mary's novel thus resonates powerfully with the ethical problems inherent in the most recent advances in genetics. At the same time, the novel vividly illustrates the terrifying ramifications and unintended consequences of such attempts to "improve" the human species.

### **References:-**

1. Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. New York: Dover Thrift, 1994.
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