

Linda Aalto

**MARGINAL WOMEN AND ABSENT
MOTHERS IN MARY SHELLEY'S
*FRANKENSTEIN***

ABSTRACT

Linda Aalto : Marginal Women and Absent Mothers in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*
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This thesis examines social criticism in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The novel subtly challenges the constructions of the patriarchal society and simultaneously demonstrates the hardships women faced in this male-centered world. In analyzing *Frankenstein* the focus is on two prominent themes: the marginal women and the absent mothers. The aim of this thesis is to identify the aspects of the society that are being criticized and to illuminate the ways in which this criticism is expressed.

Elaine Showalter's gynocritical theory along with some earlier feminist studies of the novel offer the theoretical framework for the analysis. In the theory section of the thesis, the focus is on describing the clandestine forms of communication that women had to develop in order to be able to discuss their feminine experiences and emotions in their literature as their self-expression was limited by a double standard. These include imitating the male way of writing, publishing anonymously and using symbolic elements and images that are connected with female sexuality and motherhood.

Three major aspects of the society that are being criticized are identified. These are the marginalization of women, women's exclusion from the public sphere of life and the dysfunctionality of the egoistic, patriarchal society. In *Frankenstein*, the all-male society is lacking feminine sentiment and is thus covertly portrayed as corrupted. In addition, two central themes, connected to these criticized aspects of society, are recognized: the patriarchal fear of womanhood and the conflict between the feminine ideal of self-sacrifice and patriarchal egotism. The most central finding in this thesis is that by reversing the traditional gender stereotypes, *Frankenstein* reveals the corruption of the patriarchal society and thus highlights this society's need for feminine and motherly sentiment.

Keywords: social criticism, feminism, gynocriticism, feminist literary criticism, *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley

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TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan yhteiskunnallista kritiikkiä, jota Mary Shelley esittää teoksessaan *Frankenstein*. Teoksen sisältämä hienovarainen kritiikki haastaa patriarkaalisen yhteiskunnan rakenteet ja samalla kertoo siitä, minkälaisena tämä mieskeskeinen maailma näyttäytyi aikansa naisille. Teoksen analyysissä keskitytään ensisijaisesti kahteen teemaan: romaanin naishahmojen merkityksettömyyteen sekä äitihahmojen puuttumiseen. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tunnistaa ne yhteiskunnan piirteet, joita teos kritisoi, ja havainnollistaa niitä epäsuoria tapoja, joilla tätä kritiikkiä esitetään.

Tutkimuksen teoreettiseksi viitekehikseksi valikoitui Elaine Showalterin luoma gynokritiikki, joka tutkii naiskirjallisuutta ja sen kehittymistä omaksi alakulttuurikseen. Tämän teorian ohella analyysin tukena hyödynnettiin myös aikaisempaa feminististä tutkimusta, jota romaanista on tehty.

Patriarkaalisessa yhteiskunnassa arvostettiin naisia, jotka uhrasivat oman hyvinvointinsa muiden puolesta. Tämän epäitsekään uhrautuvuuden ihanteen ja itsekeskeistä kunnianhimoa vaativan kirjailijan uran välillä oli kuitenkin jyrkkä ristiriita, minkä vuoksi naisten täytyi kehittää epäsuoria kommunikointikeinoja, joiden avulla he pystyivät käsittelemään omia naisellisia tunteitaan ja kokemuksiaan kirjallisuutensa kautta. Tutkielman teoriaosassa keskitytään kuvaamaan näitä keinoja, joita ovat miesten kirjoitustyylin imitoiminen, kirjallisuuden julkaiseminen nimettömänä sekä symboliikka, joka liittyy erityisesti naisten seksuaalisuuteen ja äitiyteen.

Teoksen analyysin perusteella tunnistetaan kolme yhteiskunnan piirrettä, joita romaani erityisesti kritisoi. Nämä ovat yhteiskunnan väheksyvä ja syrjivä asenne naisia kohtaan, naisten sulkeminen yhteiskunnallisen elämän ulkopuolelle sekä patriarkaalisen yhteiskunnan turmeltuneisuus. *Frankenstein* kuvaa moraalittoman mieskeskeisen yhteiskunnan, jonka suurin heikkous on naisellisen myötätunnon puute. Tämän lisäksi analyysin pohjalta hahmottuu kaksi keskeistä teema, jotka liittyvät kiinteästi romaanissa kritisoituihin yhteiskunnan ominaisuuksiin. Nämä teemat ovat patriarkaalinen naiseuden pelko sekä ristiriita naisellisen uhrautuvuuden ihanteen ja egoistisen mieskeskeisen yhteiskunnan välillä. Analyysin tulosten perusteella voidaan päätellä, että *Frankenstein* paljastaa patriarkaalisen yhteiskunnan korruption kääntämällä perinteiset sukupuolistereotyytiat ympäri. Tulosten pohjalta nousee esiin myös se, että romaani korostaa erityisesti sitä, että naisia ja äitejä tarvitaan paljastamaan yhteiskunnan epäkohdat ja ohjaamaan yhteiskuntaa oikeaan suuntaan.

Avainsanat: yhteiskunnallinen kritiikki, feminismi, gynokritiikki, feministinen kirjallisuudentutkimus, *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley

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1. Introduction

Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818) portrays a patriarchal nineteenth-century Genevan society, where women are the passive others, defined primarily by male ownership over them. Furthermore, these women, already lacking agency, are rendered even more apathetic by depriving them of their natural childbearing ability, as the male protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, strives to create a human being without a woman.

Through the portrayal of the marginal female characters and the absent mother figures, *Frankenstein* covertly challenges the constitutions of this patriarchal society. Thus, the following analysis primarily focuses on the condescending male view of women as biologically and psychologically inferior and on the patriarchal fear of womanhood, embodied in the absent mothers and epitomized in women's exclusion from the public sphere of life. The aim is to reveal the way the patriarchal society is covertly presented as dysfunctional and how this society's need for women is subtly underscored in the novel.

Many of the earlier analyses of *Frankenstein*, such as Moers's "Female Gothic: The Monster's Mother" and Gilbert and Gubar's "Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve", have focused quite heavily on Shelley's personal experiences and their projections in the novel. For example, Moers argues that "nothing so sets her apart from the generality of writers of her own time, and before, and for long afterward, than her early and chaotic experience, at the very time she became an author, with motherhood" (319). But, as Jacobus points out: "To insist, for instance, that *Frankenstein* reflects Mary Shelley's experience of the trauma of parturition . . . may tell us about women's lives, but it reduces the text itself to a monstrous symptom" (138). Thus, though the knowledge of Shelley's personal life helps to decipher the hidden messages in *Frankenstein*, the focal point of this thesis is the novel itself. Nevertheless, these earlier studies, along with Elaine Showalter's gynocritical theory, provide a fruitful framework and aid in

uncovering and interpreting the concealed, and indeed, almost feminist social critique in the novel.

2. Theoretical Background

As the social critique is presented in such covert ways in *Frankenstein*, Elaine Showalter's gynocritical theory offers a valuable starting point for the analysis. Gynocriticism is the study of the female literary subculture and its development (Showalter XIX). In her theory, Showalter describes the clandestine forms of communicating feminine experiences and emotions women had to develop, as their self-expression was restricted by the double standards imposed on them by the society (22). Thus gynocritical theory as a framing point helps to illuminate the undercover criticism in *Frankenstein*.

2.1 Adhering to Male Values and Imitating Men

Female authors, including Shelley, were bound by a double standard: their literature was automatically considered inferior due to them being female, and if they attempted to write like men, they were punished for not adhering to the feminine stereotypes (Showalter 63). In addition, women's literature was considered to be an incomplete version of men's, as they lacked practical experience in life (Showalter 65-66). This view of women's art as deficient is covertly challenged in *Frankenstein*, as Victor, a male creator, failing to create a functioning human being, gives life to a monster (Shelley 35). Yet, though Shelley, like other female authors, was dismayed over being patronized by the male society, she was still at the same time concerned about not fitting into the feminine stereotypes (Showalter 17). There was a severe contradiction between being an author and the feminine ideal of self-sacrifice, as it requires egoistic ambition to succeed as a writer (Showalter 18). Indeed, one of the prominent themes in *Frankenstein* appears to be the feminine "guilt of self-centered ambition", mirrored in Victor's guilt over his creation (Showalter 19). Consequently, while covertly criticizing the society in her novel, Shelley publicly highlighted her devotion to the female stereotypes, which is demonstrated in her introduction to the 1831 version of *Frankenstein*, where she downplays

her creative merits, shrinking herself to a mere “imitator – rather doing as others had done” (165).

To avoid these anxieties concerning the integration of the public role with the principal, domestic role, *Frankenstein* was initially published anonymously. Using a pseudonym, or resorting to anonymity, was a tactic used by feminine authors to evade being judged in terms of the double standard (Showalter 48). In addition to anonymity, Shelley also imitated a male way of writing. First, *Frankenstein* was at the time of its initial publication criticized for not moralizing enough about its “blasphemous subject”, and because it was impossible for society to believe that “a woman should refuse to moralize”, the author’s gender was presumed male (Poovey 345). Second, this male way of writing is also displayed in the narrative structure, as according to Showalter, it was typical for male writing that the narrative structure was built on some broad conception, which is true for *Frankenstein* as it is, at least seemingly, concerned with scientific experimentation (73). Moreover, the narrative structure utilized also allows Shelley to covertly process her anxieties, as Poovey suggests, it “enables Shelley to express and efface herself at the same time and thus, at least partially, to satisfy her conflicting desires for self-assertion and social acceptance” (355).

2.2 Covertly Feminine Symbolism

In writing *Frankenstein*, Shelley remodeled the male aestheticism to “create for herself a nonassertive, and hence acceptable, voice” (Poovey 353). Consequently, the novel is characterized by symbolic recurring elements and themes. These include: the symbolic, enclosed room of a woman’s own; the male model heroes; and the feminine commitment in educating the society.

First, the idea of a secret chamber is exemplified in Victor’s passionate and forbidden, strikingly feminine, quest to create life, which takes place in his own secret

laboratory. This image of a room exclusively reserved for feminine creativity is a product of the secrecy hovering around the taboos of female sexuality and reproduction (Showalter 67).

Second, Shelley processes her own anxieties concerning “the egotism that . . . [she] associates with the artist’s monstrous self-assertion” through Victor Frankenstein, the male model hero (Poovey 345). Showalter suggests that these male “model heroes” were women’s “projected egos” to whom the female authors mirrored their own forbidden passions and ambitions (111-12).

And last, *Frankenstein* manifests the importance of feminine sentiment for the society. The female authors of the nineteenth century felt it to be their duty to cultivate the patriarchal society, as they regarded feminine compassion as superior to male indifference (Showalter 53, 69). The corrupted male society in need of female salvation is epitomized in the horrendous results of Victor’s fervent immersion in exercising his mind. Thus, in *Frankenstein*, the cultivation of society is performed by reversing the old gender stereotypes and by treating the female emotions as “the complement, and the salvation, of masculine reserve” (Showalter 124).

Taken together, these symbolic elements enable Shelley to covertly process the universal feminine anxieties and experiences. And therefore, through this feminine imagery, connected with the communal secret of women’s prohibited sexuality and fertility, *Frankenstein* succeeds in delivering its hidden message for an exclusively female audience (Showalter 12-13).

2.3 Sublimation of Motherhood

Frankenstein could be described as a “cultist celebration of womanhood and motherhood” (Showalter 149). By treating female passion and fertility as origins of power Shelley, like the feminists such as Mary Hays after her, challenged the doctrines of the patriarchal society

(Showalter XXVII). In the novel, excessive male passion causes the degeneracy of the society. The solution for this corrosion is the sublimation of female sexuality into maternity, and the distribution of motherly love onto the patriarchal society (Showalter 154-55). Showalter points out the pre-eminent contradiction between rebelling against the traditional confinement of women into the private sphere, while simultaneously highlighting women's moral superiority to men, as they have not been tarnished by the male society. In *Frankenstein*, the limited female experience is indeed presented as something divine, and, though an opposition against the confinement of women into a domestic sphere is apparent, the morality of these domestic goddesses is still idolized in a way that might be characterized as "defensive womanhood" (Showalter 175). It appears that Shelley, in a rather feminist fashion, felt it was in her power, and, indeed, her responsibility, to expose the corruption of the patriarchal society and to bless the society with the sacred feminine virtues, thus elevating it from the decay (Showalter 151, 153). Consequently, *Frankenstein* can be interpreted as a manifestation of the superiority of the feminine sentiment and, more specifically, as a call for the maternal feeling to be distributed through the society, thus indicating how women should be given more central roles in the society instead of being pushed to the margins.

3. Marginal Women, Superior Men

An extensive amount of covert critique that targets the dysfunctional patriarchal society, where sentiment has been separated from logic, can be distinguished in *Frankenstein*. And, indeed, as Gilbert and Gubar claim: “Though it has been disguised, buried, or miniaturized, femaleness – the gender definition of mothers and daughters, . . . monsters and false creators – is at the heart of this apparently masculine book” (335). The novel depicts a prejudiced, patriarchal society, where men must hide their emotions “for excessive sorrow [or any emotion] prevents improvement or enjoyment, or even the discharge of daily usefulness, without which no man is fit for society” (Shelley 61). The critique towards this unsympathetic all-male society is subtly buried under the seemingly male style of writing utilized in *Frankenstein*.

In addition to the subtle criticism, some explicit social commentary can be distinguished, too. This is exemplified in the monster’s sarcastic exclamation about the unjust patriarchal society and its hypocritical idea of justice: “You accuse me of murder; and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature. Oh, praise the eternal justice of man!” (Shelley 69). However, the significance of this explicit commentary is diminished by the disclaimer in the preface: “The opinions which naturally spring from the character and situation are by no means to be conceived as existing always in my own conviction; nor is any inference justly to be drawn from the following pages as prejudicing any philosophical doctrine of whatever kind” (Shelley 6). Hence, even though this can be interpreted as a false statement, it still undermines the validity of the explicit commentary, and thus, the covert criticism is more potent than the superficial one.

Nevertheless, three major aspects of the patriarchal society that are being criticized both covertly and overtly can be identified. The first of these is the way society treats women as inferior, to such an extent that they are regarded as mere possessions. Second is

women's exclusion from the public sphere of life. And last is the egoistic arrogance of the patriarchal society.

3.1 Women as Inferior Beings

All the female characters in *Frankenstein* are rather marginal. Indeed, they could be replaced by any other character and it would not make a difference. For instance, the letters from Walton to his sister could address anyone without losing their purpose. Margaret Saville is merely a passive recipient, lacking any other role, which underscores the patriarchal idea of women as the silent listeners (Dickerson 83). In addition, the anonymous monster, lacking explicit indications of his sex is also installed, according to London, "in the feminine economy – the traditional locus for "the monstrous"" (256). He too is an outsider, an almost silent observer in the world of men, "as nameless as a woman is in patriarchal society" (Gilbert and Gubar 344). Therefore, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, the monster's story is "a philosophical meditation on what it means to be . . . a creature of the second sex" (338). Yet, as all the important characters are male, the story is not told from the viewpoint of the silent observer. Dickerson verbalizes this conflict by stating that "in this novel where narcissistic males . . . dominate the story, the selfless, ethereal and unscientific women in the novel are practically transparent if not invisible" (79-80). Moreover, Justine's advice for Elizabeth, "Live and be happy, and make others so", exemplifies how women's sole purpose is to please others, and, if necessary, to willingly sacrifice their own happiness in the process (Shelley 59). Thus, the women in *Frankenstein* are "at best, . . . the bearers of a traditional ideology of love, nurturance, and domesticity; at worst, passive victims" (Jacobus 132).

These passive women willingly submit themselves to men, fulfilling the patriarchal fantasy (Showalter 12). This is demonstrated by Victor's admiring statement about Elizabeth how "no one could submit with more grace than she did to constraint and caprice"

(Shelley 20). Moreover, men are obsessed with owning the subservient women, thus fully depriving them of agency and reducing them to “treasure[s]” to be possessed, or even to something resembling “a favourite animal” (Shelley 20, 85). Notably, the view of women not being their own persons, but rather incomplete without their male companions is implied as the idea of Elizabeth losing him causes Victor greater agony than his own death does: “The prospect [of his own death] did not move me to fear; yet when I thought of my beloved Elizabeth, – of her tears and endless sorrow, when she should find her lover so barbarously snatched from her, – tears . . . streamed from my eyes” (Shelley 121).

Indeed, the patriarchal society treats women as both biologically and psychologically inferior. *Frankenstein* challenges the patriarchal belief of the female body making women “unfitting . . . for the steady stream of ever-recurring work” by portraying Victor’s male body giving up on him after his creative efforts (Showalter 64). Besides, as Victor’s symptoms, nervous fever and hysteria, are quite feminine, his sickness can be perceived as a “symbolic immersion . . . in feminine experience” (Showalter 125). Psychologically, women are considered simple, as is illustrated by Walton considering “simplicity” to be his sister’s “characteristic charm” (Shelley 17). This condescending view of women is further exemplified in the way Victor treats Elizabeth as a clueless child: “I sometimes joined Elizabeth, and exerted myself to point out to her the various beauties of the scene (Shelley 65). Furthermore, women are portrayed as sensible and observant, and therefore, hard to deceive: “I concealed my feelings by an appearance of hilarity, that . . . hardly deceived the ever-watchful and nicer eye of Elizabeth” (Shelley 138). This female sensibility is contrasted by the male fixation with logic, illuminated by Victor’s statement: “I now related my history briefly, but with firmness and precision, marking the dates with accuracy, and never deviating into invective or exclamation.” (Shelley 143). Moreover, this statement is also a

manifestation of the male uneasiness with feelings, further accentuated in how it is desirable for men to possess “calm and mild manners” (Shelley 125).

The patriarchal idea of women as sentimental beings is not opposed in *Frankenstein*, but rather the need for this sentimentality is underscored. The notion of the feminine model as desirable is emphasized in the way female traits are appreciated when appearing in men, seen in “the most noble of human creatures”, Clerval, who Victor describes in a feminine manner, as “gentle and lovely being”, whose “soul overflowed with ardent affections” (Shelley 17, 112). Thus, here, the idea of women being spiritually superior to men is covertly introduced. Yet, simultaneously, through the powerless and subordinate female characters, *Frankenstein* subtly reveals the various difficulties women face in the patriarchal society, and, indeed, as Dickerson suggests, the thing in the novel that seems to be more frightening than the monster itself, is the women who “hardly seem important or visible” (82).

3.2 Women’s Exclusion from the Public Sphere

The passive women are excluded from the public sphere of life in *Frankenstein*. This separation is an epitome of the patriarchal fear towards independent women and their liberated sexuality, exemplified in the reasoning behind Victor destroying the female monster. Victor fears how the female monster is “in all probability . . . to become a thinking and reasoning animal” and how “a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth” if the creation is completed (Shelley 118-19). As women are rejected from the public life, they cannot properly operate in the male world (Mellor 357). This is illuminated in Justine’s trial as Justine is unable to defend herself, and though believing in her innocence, Elizabeth cannot help her either (Shelley 54-56). This incapability to function highlights the inequality of opportunities offered for men and women. In the nineteenth century, women were denied access to education (Showalter 34). Elizabeth criticizes this as she regrets how “she had not the same opportunities of enlarging her

experience, and cultivating her understanding” as Victor (Shelley 110). Moreover, the monster points out how the “increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast I was” (Shelley 91). Thus, education helps him better realize his inferior status (Yousef 219). And consequently, as the “knowledge would open the world of male power” for women, they were denied education to ensure they did not challenge the status quo (Showalter 35). Still, as Brooks notes that the monster is the most verbally eloquent being in the novel, it is implied how the same might be true for women, too, were they allowed to participate in the public conversations (371).

The patriarchal society based solely on male virtues, is displayed as flawed. This dysfunctionality is indicated by the hypocritical nature of the male society and by the deranged male idea of justice. The hypocrisy is demonstrated in the conflict between male words and actions, as Victor declares that “A thousand times rather would I have confessed myself guilty of the crime ascribed to Justine” and then fails to take responsibility (Shelley 54). Furthermore, the patriarchal society is obsessed with a retributive idea of justice, exemplified in Victor’s avowal: “Again do I vow vengeance; again do I devote thee, miserable fiend, to torture and death” (147). Yet, it becomes clear that justice through revenge will forever remain unattainable as Victor perceives how “now, when I appeared almost within grasp of my enemy, my hopes were suddenly extinguished, and I lost all trace of him more utterly than I had ever done before” and then dies without executing his justice (Shelley 150). However, women recognize the shortcomings of this retributive idea of justice, as Elizabeth reflects after Justine’s wrongful execution: “I no longer see the world and its works as they before appeared to me . . . now . . . men appear to me as monsters thirsting for each other’s blood” (Shelley 63). Moreover, Victor’s father’s advice for Elizabeth to “rely on the justice of our judges” proves how blindly men trust this faulty, bloodhungry justice system (Shelley 53). The imperfections of the society, resulting

mainly from excluding “feminine affections and compassion” from the public sphere of life, stress the male society’s need for female sentimentality (Mellor 358).

3.3 Egoistic Men and the Feminine Ideal of Self-sacrifice

The patriarchal “world . . . hateful to” women, is egoistic, arrogant and obsessed with glory (Shelley 59). Most of the central male characters are preoccupied with the idea of their own exceptionality. This is exemplified in Walton and Victor, who both believe they can offer the whole humankind something no man has ever been able to. For instance, Walton writes to his sister that “I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man” and ends his letter asking a rhetorical question: “Do I not deserve to accomplish some great purpose” (Shelley 7, 9). The arrogant, patriarchal belief of male exceptionality is manifested by professor M. Waldman’s statement, too: “The labours of men of genius, however erroneously directed, scarcely ever fail in ultimately turning to the solid advantage of mankind” (Shelley 29). This obsession with ego is closely connected with the patriarchal infatuation with the glory resulting from male creativity, exemplified in Victor’s motivation for his scientific experimentation, as he states that “wealth was an inferior object; but what glory would attend the discovery” (Shelley 23). Moreover, the ambitious scientific exploration is linked with compulsive behaviour, as Victor reflects how his experimentation “swallowed up every habit of my nature” (Shelley 34).

These men, fixated with glory, refuse to take responsibility for their expeditions. Victor epitomizes this as he blames his father as the origin of his horrendous act: “It is even possible, that the train of my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin” if his father had “taken the pains to explain to me [Victor], that the principles of Agrippa had been entirely exploded” (Shelley 22). Furthermore, the arrogant male society refuses to

learn from its earlier mistakes, as is illustrated by Victor's words directed for Walton: "You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been" (Shelley 17). Victor has already lost everything and still refuses to believe that this fixation with glory will not be ultimately rewarding. Therefore, it is implied that the feminine ideal of self-sacrifice is lacking from the egoistic, male-centered society.

Consequently, the paradigm that *Frankenstein* is perhaps most engaged with, is the one between self-centered ambition and the ideal of self-sacrifice (Showalter 19). There is an apparent paradox between men's creative explorations, their "innate grotesqueness", and the feminine ideal of all-encompassing martyrdom (Poovey 351). The incarnation of this feminine self-sacrifice is Victor's mother, Caroline Beaufort, who is portrayed in a painting as "kneeling by the coffin of her dead father. Her garb was rustic, and her cheek pale; but there was an air of dignity and beauty, that hardly permitted the sentiment of pity" (Shelley 51). Moreover, Justine Moritz's nurturing nature also demonstrates this martyrdom: "She nursed Madame Frankenstein . . . in her last illness with the greatest affection and care; and afterwards attended her own mother during a tedious illness, in a manner that excited the admiration of all who knew her" (Shelley 56). As Showalter indicates, the fascination with the ideal of sacrificing self for others might have offered Shelley "some authority in depicting the feminine imperative in" *Frankenstein* (53). This is further implied by the description of "the ideas of . . . self-sacrifice" as divine, and, moreover, as it is Victor who says this, it also suggests that self-sacrifice is an ideal held in the society at large (Shelley 115). Yet, for this ideal to realize, women must be welcomed to participate in the public sphere of life.

All the destruction in *Frankenstein* could have been avoided had Victor not arrogantly pushed his scientific exploration too far (Brooks 387) by creating the monster he had "endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror" (Shelley 50-51). And indeed,

the novel is ultimately a “story of the male creator making a spectacle of himself” (London 256). Thus, the novel can be interpreted as criticizing the innate arrogance and egoism of the patriarchal society and, further, as advocating the importance of the feminine self-sacrifice. This is suggested by Poovey, too, who points out how Victor’s egoistic ambition exemplifies how “the imagination expands the individual’s self-absorption to fill the entire universe, and, as it does so, it murders everyone in its path” (349).

4. Absent Mothers

In addition to promoting the general feminine ideals and traits, *Frankenstein* can be more specifically perceived as a “cultist celebration of . . . motherhood” (Showalter 149). Throughout the novel, the importance of maternal duty and love is stressed. As a result, the sense of the patriarchal society needing the motherly nurturing that only women can offer is evident. This significance of the motherly duty is manifested, for instance, in the monster’s appeal towards his creator: “Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind” (Shelley 68). His creator, the one that should be his mother, is the only one who has any moral obligations towards him. Though, it becomes clear that men, lacking feminine sentiment, are unable to carry the responsibilities of motherhood and to fulfill the maternal duty, which is indicated by Victor Frankenstein describing his motherly burden as “slavery” (Shelley 109). Thus, apparently, men are unable to offer the society the idealized maternal love and, hence, it is implied, in a rather feminist fashion, that it is women’s duty to distribute this uniquely feminine value onto the society (Showalter 24-25). The importance of mothers, their love and nurturing, is further underscored when Victor is leaving for the university and Elizabeth sheds tears that Victor interprets as her sorrow over the fact “that [if] the same journey was to have taken place three months before, . . . a mother’s blessing would have accompanied me [Victor]” (Shelley 26). This scene suggests that had Victor received his mother’s blessing, that is, if his mother had not died, all the ensuing misery would have been avoided.

Maternal duty is closely connected with guilt. This is demonstrated in Justine who, after William is murdered, “accuses herself unjustly as the cause of his death” (Shelley 47). As a substitute mother of the murdered child, Justine confesses her guilt, as she feels it was her maternal responsibility to keep the child safe. And, indeed, here Justine, the mother as a martyr, embodies the feminine ideal of self-sacrifice. Notably, men are unable to truly feel this feminine guilt, as is illustrated when Victor, without any remorse, abandons his newborn child

in a way unthinkable for women, bound by maternal duty and guilt (Shelley 36). And, even though Victor identifies, or at least thinks he identifies, “what the duties of a creator towards his creature were”, he ultimately fails to fulfill these duties because he is a man (Shelley 69-70).

Though the significance of motherly love is emphasized in *Frankenstein*, mother figures are scarce. This absence of mothers symbolizes the patriarchal society’s view of female sexuality and women’s reproductive power as something threatening (Showalter 98). Jacobus suggests that the lack of mothers and women might follow from the fact that “the primary bond of paternity unites scientist and his creation so exclusively, [that] women who get in the way must fall victim to the struggle” (131). Hence, by his act of creation, Victor, the embodiment of the patriarchal society, deprives women of their ultimate source of power to further oppress them (Mellor 363). And moreover, as Victor creates new life out of corpses, birth is portrayed as “a hideous thing” in the novel (Moers 323). Thus, the virtually sexless creation of the monster hints at the conflict that the nineteenth-century women battled with, that is, a conflict between the virtuous, maternal love and the internalized fear of female sexuality (Showalter 156). The horrendous idea of sexual passion is linked to the procreative power of women when Victor’s act of creating life is described as a “frantic impulse” (Shelley 33). This patriarchal abhorrence is further implied in the way Victor’s passion is carried out in a secret chamber. His “workshop of filthy creation”, resembles in multiple ways the symbolic, enclosed rooms reserved for female creativity (Shelley 34). And thus, the traditional ideas of “feminine passion and masculine repression” are reversed in *Frankenstein*: women lack passion while Victor and his male monster are overcome by it (Showalter 103).

Moreover, the monster Victor creates might be identified as a personification of the dichotomy prominent in the nineteenth century between the rational, male creativity and the passionate, female creativity based on reproduction (Showalter 63). This conflict is also

reflected in the way the egoistic male ambition must be governed by the domestic affections, as is exemplified in Victor leaving to university, where his ambition is no longer regulated, and thus he succumbs to scientific experimentation and the “love for his family is the first victim of his growing obsession” (Poovey 346-47). And furthermore, being the arrogant male he is, Victor believes himself to be exceptional for his ability to create life and goes as far as thinking of himself as resembling something like God: “A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (Shelley 33).

The society lacking motherly sentiment and compassion is portrayed as destructive, as the monster tells how he, “finding myself unsympathized with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me” (Shelley 95). This illuminates the society’s innate need for maternal affection, as mothers, and women in general, for their “virtuous nature”, are essential members of functional and peaceful society. This innate need is also exemplified in the monster beginning to sympathize with the De Lacey’s, and thus feeling as if he was part of the family even though the family is unaware of his existence (Shelley 77). Moreover, Brooks interprets the monster’s longing for a female mate as his “unconscious desire . . . for unconditional hearing, recognition, love from his parent” and that “It’s absolute requital could only take the form of handing over the mother” (380). As for the humans in the novel, “Abandonment or neglect is mitigated by adoption and inclusion” but it is not the same for the monster, as he is unnatural and born without relation to any woman, as it is women who take these orphans under their wing and thus, “the question of what he is arises from the realization that human selves are born and formed in relation to others and that he has no such relations” (Yousef 220, 222). Hence, as Brooks states, the real “monsterism . . . is precisely lack of relation, apartness” (374). This is apparent in the way, how the rejection from the family, and thus also from the society, makes the monster the wretch he is (Shelley 80). The monster’s self-reflecting monologue, “What was I?”, emphasizes the importance of a mother as a way of self-

identification and points out, once again, how mothers and women are indeed far more important for the society than they are accounted for (Shelley 84).

5. Conclusion

The subtle social commentary concealed under the seemingly male text of *Frankenstein* might escape the reader if Shelley's personal factors and experiences are not considered. One of the dominating factors in interpreting the novel as a critique of the nineteenth-century patriarchal society is Shelley's gender, Moers even argues that, though there are no important female characters, "no other Gothic work by a woman writer, perhaps no other literary work of any kind by a woman, better repays examination in the light of the sex of its author. For *Frankenstein* is a birth myth, and one that was lodged in the novelist's imagination . . . by the fact that she was herself a mother" (319). However, rather than being her own "myth of origins", as Gilbert and Gubar claim, Shelley draws from her own experiences to tell the universal story of the world as it appears for women and mothers (331). This is also suggested by Shelley herself, in her introduction to the 1831 version of *Frankenstein*, as she states that "Invention . . . does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded" (167). And furthermore, she explicitly stresses that the novel is not about her: "I did not make myself the heroine of my stories" (166). The sense of *Frankenstein* indeed being a universal story about the world that is hateful for women is further implied in Shelley's statement that the novel is "a transcript of the grim terrors of my waking dream" (169).

Thus, *Frankenstein* can be summarized as a universal story about womanhood that emphasizes the horrendous results of the all-male society lacking maternal love and warns about the tragic results of marginalizing women. Moreover, an undertone of suppressed female anger and the truly revolutionary idea of overthrowing the patriarchy are present, as the social criticism expressed in the novel seems to ultimately reach its climax in the monster's threat: "Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful" (Shelley 121).

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