

Focusing on the Female in Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein": The Role of Elizabeth

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* occupies an interesting place in the tradition of the Female Gothic, as Shelley's main character is a man occupying the masculine coded world of scientific invention and societal innovation. Victor Frankenstein goes against the natural order of nature and creates a life from scientific experiment alone, and in doing so spells destruction for himself and his family. Shelley is conscious of the fact that she is writing in a man's world and in the male tradition, and so she catalogs Victor's descent through his mistake of usurping the role of women in creating life. Shelley responds and critiques this masculine norm through her usage of female characters, specifically that of Elizabeth Frankenstein, to advocate for a society without two distinct masculine and feminine spheres. Elizabeth's character supports Shelley's argument against two separate female and male disciplines and worlds by not only being a product of a women writer in a male tradition, but also by representing Victor's morality and correctly advocating for Justine's innocence through emotional appeals. In both instances she is ignored or not present, and this adversely affects each situation.

Elizabeth is not biologically a part of the Frankenstein family, but rather an adopted child, "fairer than a pictured cherub," who becomes Victor's constant companion, as well as a female support system for the Frankenstein family (Shelley 17). Elizabeth functions as the Eve of Victor Frankenstein's idyllic childhood, introduced as all that's good and right with constant religious connotation. With "celestial eyes" and a "saintly soul," Elizabeth functioned not only in the role of a sister, but upon their mother's death she was instructed to "supply [her] place" to the others, essentially becoming a mother in her own right. Victor's perception of her was always as a sister and lover, and often referenced her and her abilities in the language of possession, regarding Elizabeth as his object instead of his equal. She was his "promised gift," and "all

praises bestowed on her” Victor took as his own (Shelley 18). The Frankenstein’s treatment of Elizabeth, especially in Victor’s case, seems to establish females as passable and possessionable, but it is through treating Elizabeth, and the feminine natural world, this way that ultimately leads to Victor’s downfall and the destruction of his family.

Elizabeth was always “of a calmer and more concentrated disposition” than Victor throughout their childhood, and his constant interactions with her provided a well-rounded (education) throughout his younger days. She “busied herself with following the aerial creations of the poets,” and served as “the living spirit of love” throughout Victor’s childhood. Victor was always a student of science and one for penetrating the secrets of the natural order, and it was Elizabeth, through her associations with poetry, love, and nature, that kept Victor in tandem with his own morals and emotions. As a sister who was constantly there to “subdue [Victor] to a semblance of her own gentleness” it was her absence from his time at () that separated Victor from his own morals and ideals, and insulated him in a rational, scientific world of his own creation. He bestowed “the last feminine attentions on her” as he left for school, leaving behind the feminine and what Elizabeth represents to become entrapped in his own mind and a slave to his own creation. This goodbye makes it clear that schooling and science are considered in the masculine sphere of society, yet this immersion into the masculine sphere gave Victor the chance and means to create artificial life, and in doing so underscore the female role in natural conception, a mistake that will haunt him for the rest of his days.

In the murder trial of Justine, Elizabeth makes an emotional appeal in response to the reason of the court and though she is ultimately correct about the truth of the matter, the ideals of emotion and understanding are far from the masculine world focused on science and evidence. This trial occurs after Victor comes back from school in fear of his creation and found that

Elizabeth wept and exclaimed “I have murdered my darling child” after his brother is found dead. Elizabeth is still functioning in the role of the mother since he has been gone, and though he tried to undermine Elizabeth’s role in the creation of a child, she still suffered because she already had “children”. Victor didn’t even consider emotion when creating life, citing emotion as a distinctly feminine trait whose separation spelled disaster for him and the court of justice. Elizabeth defends Justine’s innocence through an emotional defense, appeals to “her character” as one of the “most amiable and benevolent of human creatures,” who acted towards the deceased as “a most affectionate mother” (Shelley 56). Again this corroborates female characters with motherly roles, but it also emphasizes the fact that base desire and reason for the murder does not exist in Justine’s case. Justine was ultimately “unjustly condemned” due to the disconnection between the masculine and feminine worlds, when Elizabeth’s appeal doesn’t work due to the reasoning of the court. It is not until he witnesses “the deep and voiceless grief” of Elizabeth after these events that Victor understands the extent of his treachery to nature.