



# A feminist reading of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

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En feministisk läsning av Mary Shelleys Frankenstein

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Mikael Hillerström

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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Supervisor: Marinette Grimbeek

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Examiner: Anna Linzie

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## Abstract

This essay is a feminist analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) that shows how Shelley criticizes society through presenting feminist viewpoints. I argue that Shelley critiques traditional gender roles by punishing characters subscribing to them. Most of the characters conform to traditional gender stereotypes. The male characters are ambitious and self-centered while the female characters are self-sacrificing and docile. The main protagonist Victor Frankenstein represents patriarchal belief and is incapable of any feminine attributes which leads to the demise of everyone he cares for, and himself. The male-only narration emphasizes how insignificant the male characters deem women to be, as they are rarely heard of and most of the time ignored. In the novel, nature is represented as active and feminine, and it punishes or rewards characters in accordance with their actions.

Keywords: Mary Shelley; *Frankenstein*; feminist reading; gender roles

## Sammanfattning

Den här uppsatsen är en feministisk analys av Mary Shelleys *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) som visar hur Shelley kritiserar samhället genom att presentera feministiska synpunkter. Jag hävdar att Shelley kritiserar traditionella könsroller genom att straffa karaktärer som bekänner sig till dem. De flesta karaktärerna överensstämmer med traditionella könsstereotyper. De manliga karaktärerna är ambitiösa och självcentrerade medan de kvinnliga karaktärerna offerar sig och är fogliga. Huvudkaraktären Victor Frankenstein representerar patriarkalisk tro och är oförmögen till alla feminina attribut vilket leder till alla hans närståendes död, samt sin egen. Det enbart manliga narrativet betonar hur obetydliga de manliga karaktärerna anser att kvinnor är, eftersom de sällan hörs och för det mesta ignoreras. I romanen representeras naturen som aktiv och feminin, och den straffar eller belönar karaktärer i enlighet med deras handlingar.

Nyckelord: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, feminism, könsroller

Mary Shelley probably had no idea when she created her novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* that its legacy would last for over 200 years through movies, video games, toys and costumes resembling Boris Karloff with bolts in the neck. Shelley's *Frankenstein* was published 1818 and is a literary work still considered relevant. This is most likely due to the range of topics the novel addresses. Many of the topics are universal or reoccurring, such as humanity's infinite lust for knowledge and the power to control nature, or the violent nature of humanity. It is worth mentioning that Shelley's mother was Mary Wollstonecraft, a highly regarded pioneering advocate for women's rights, while her father was the utilitarian and anarchist philosopher William Godwin. Shelley was definitely politically aware. My contention is that *Frankenstein* is subtly presenting a critique of society by showing the reader what happens for instance when female characters embrace a self-sacrificial attitude while there obviously are different options with better outcomes. Therefore I argue that Shelley's novel is a feminist work that rejects patriarchy. I will show this by reasoning that *Frankenstein* critiques traditional gender roles through the novel's narration and characters while using nature as a feminine representation to punish or reward characters depending on their actions.

According to *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* by Lois Tyson, patriarchy is simply any culture that privileges males by promoting traditional Western gender roles. Traditional gender roles cast men as strong, protective, rational and decisive while women are characterized as emotional, irrational, weak, nurturing and submissive. These traditional gender roles are part of the cultural inequities current today such as access to leadership roles or differences in salary received for the same amount of work (85). In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar also refers to the concepts "angel" and "monster" which simply put indicate whether a woman obeys traditional gender rules or not. An angel is for example gentle, submissive, virginal, and angelic, while a monster is for example violent, aggressive, worldly, and monstrous (19). There are many different types of feminist studies that analyse *Frankenstein*, such as Anne K. Mellor arguing nature's impact through a feminist lens or Rosemary Hathaway examining how Victor's greatest crimes may be his violation of domesticity.

To begin with, *Frankenstein* has a complex narrative structure with narratives within narratives. Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein and the Creature are all narrators. The initial narrator is Robert who writes letters about his expedition to the Arctic to his sister Margaret.

Robert's narrative starts and ends the novel, and thereby frames the entire novel because he listens to and relates the story about Victor and the Creature. The second narrative is that of Victor Frankenstein, the title character and main protagonist. Victor tells Robert about his past when they meet on Robert's ship after Victor is rescued from the ice. The Creature's narrative is related by Victor to Robert, and comprises the Creature's direct words when he and Victor met in the past. The Creature's viewpoint is thus conveyed to us through Victor to Robert. This complex narrative structure offers the reader the Creature's perspective in relation to Victor's, thus providing separate perspectives on the same events. All three narrators are male, and therefore readers always have the male perspective of interaction with female characters. The female characters are passive and absent even when present. This absence of the female perspective highlights the male characters' focus on their own endeavours and male relationships. The male perspective is also evident when women characters are side-lined in events and when males are passive when they ought to be active. Victor shows this several times. Cynthia Pon recognizes this as a "theme of the masculine quest" (35) where the male characters are too busy with ambitions and prominent quests to bother with tasks such as taking care of the household.

Furthermore, Robert's narrative may be short, but it displays plenty of patriarchal beliefs regarding his sister such as assuming her feelings or only concerning about himself. The letters seem to be more of an excuse to write to himself about his own journey. Robert's journey is for fame which he desires; he tried to be recognized as a poet but failed, as he reminds his sister: "You are well acquainted with my failure and how heavily I bore the disappointment" (Shelley 4). The letters are obviously unable to reach Margaret as Robert is on his journey which could mean that he is trying to bolster his own ego rather than speaking to his sister. According to the expectations that a real man is to provide and achieve (Tyson 87), Robert is no doubt feeling the pressure to succeed due to his past failures and he explains his ambitions in his letters. Robert is happy to meet Victor because he is unable to find an intellectual match among the sailors on board; Victor is however an equal and a scientist. Their friendship is so intense to Robert that he writes to Margaret that he loves Victor as much as a brother.

In addition to previous paragraph, the language Robert uses shows us how self-absorbed he is. There are many sentences beginning with "I", which are protocol for letter writing but so are questions, and the questions are scarce. Instead of asking Margaret what she would feel like when reading his letter, Robert predicts how she will react, writing "You will rejoice ..."

(Shelley 2) or "... you cannot contest ..." (Shelley 3). In the following quotation, Robert clearly shows the different reactions expected of men and women on seeing Victor's appearance after he passes out in the cold: "Upon hearing this he Victor appeared satisfied and consented to come on board. Good God! Margaret, if you had seen the man who thus capitulated for his safety, your surprise would have been boundless" (Shelley 16). When Robert writes about Victor's appearance, he notes that his sister's reaction would be "boundless", meaning that she would be unable to contain her emotions at the sight of Victor's appearance or incapable of handling the situation as he does. In the same letter, Robert describes himself acting in a more logical manner by carrying Victor to the cabin. Robert does not mention being emotionally affected, worried or concerned for Victor but focuses on describing what he actually did. Under these circumstances Tyson argues that women tend to be portrayed as less logical and more emotional (86-87).

Although Margaret is only the recipient of the letters, she is arguably more important to the story doing nothing than Robert does by doing a great deal. Without her Robert would not need to write the letters and therefore he could not possibly have written down the story of Victor. This could be a way of implying that even the quietest and most invisible female characters are important. Margaret's presence, or rather absence, is worth noting because she is the only female character presented who is never given space to talk, or visually shown to anybody. Ashley J. Cross writes, "Margaret Saville's presence, as determining of the novel's form, demands interpretation by the reader... the reading eyes of Mrs. Saville threaten to disrupt the reflection between reader and text, to know more than they should" (32). I agree, since we do not know whether the letters arrived to Margaret or not, it is up for interpretation who is actually retelling the story. Leila Silvana May argues that it is possible to interpret Margaret as being Shelley (673). After all, they share the same initials, M. S. (May 673). The inclusion of Margaret as recipient of the letters could be Shelley's way of sharing her reality and circumstance as women in 1818 when the first version of *Frankenstein* was published. Shelley's life, and most of the female characters in the novel, is consistently being pushed to the side lines because of men whose ambitions are prioritised. Margaret is arguably the anchor point to the story as she is the receiver of Robert's letters.

I will now move on to analyse the characters that have more narrative context and surround Victor. Victor shares ambitions with Robert in the sense that they both want to change the world through discoveries and distance themselves from family and friends. Victor's narrative is told in the first person to Robert. At the time, Victor is lying in Robert's cabin incredibly

sick, to the degree that he can be said to be on his deathbed. Moreover, Victor has a fair amount of interaction with Elizabeth Lavenza, whom he describes as “the beautiful and adored companion of all my occupations and my pleasures” (Shelley 29). These are descriptions of affection, but it should be noted that the adjectives chosen by Victor most of the time describe physical appearance rather than personality such as kindness or intelligence. According to Tyson, patriarchal preferences regarding the physical appearance of women include that “females must be beautiful, sweet, and young if they are to be worthy of romantic admiration” (89). Tyson continues to make comparisons between Snow White and Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, all of which follow the same pattern. The following quotation is when Victor is a child and indicates the start of his patriarchal thoughts regarding ownership of women:

On the evening previous to her being brought to my home, my mother had said playfully, ‘I have a pretty present for my Victor— tomorrow he shall have it.’ And when, on the morrow, she presented Elizabeth to me as her promised gift, I, with childish seriousness, interpreted her words literally and looked upon Elizabeth as mine—mine to protect, love, and cherish. (Shelley 29)

It should be noted that it is Victor’s mother, Caroline, who here presents Elizabeth as a gift. This shows that Caroline is so caught in patriarchal thinking that she promotes patriarchal values by treating Elizabeth as an object for her son’s pleasure. Victor even goes as far as to call Elizabeth “a possession of my own” (Shelley 30). Victor continues this possessive mindset and keeps referring Elizabeth as “my Elizabeth” throughout the novel, thereby implying that he owns her.

Caroline represents the stereotypical patriarchal woman and she is described as fair, soft and benevolent and committed to her father’s care (Shelley 26). Caroline’s part of the story is short however because Elizabeth contracts scarlet fever and the only person willing to nurse her during her illness is Caroline. Caroline is warned, “During her illness many arguments had been urged to persuade my mother to refrain from attending upon her” (Shelley 39), as the risk of contagion was imminent. To use Gilbert and Gubar’s terminology, Caroline here chooses to act as an angel. Gilbert and Gubar argue that her behavior is debilitating (53), because the key characteristic of the angel is the complete surrender of her own personal comfort, personal desires or both. This act is precisely why the angel woman dies, for to be selfless is not only to be noble but also dead (Gilbert and Gubar 25). In the novel, Victor

describes Caroline as "... his angel mother" (Shelley 80), due to the fact that she accepted and promoted traditional gender roles by sacrificing herself to nurse Elizabeth.

Victor does not help Elizabeth to look after his mother, because he is busy preparing for the trip to the university of Ingolstadt to study and get acquainted with other customs (Shelley 39). When Caroline dies, Victor's thoughts are only "My mother was dead, but we had still duties which we ought to perform; we must continue our course with the rest and learn to think ourselves fortunate whilst one remains whom the spoiler has not seized. My departure for Ingolstadt, which had been deferred by these events, was now again determined upon." (Shelley 40-41), Victor's mother dies, but he is determined to stay on his personal quest in pursuit of science and knowledge. When Caroline dies, Elizabeth has to take on the role of the mother of the house: "She indeed veiled her grief and strove to act the comforter to us all. She looked steadily on life and assumed its duties with courage and zeal" (Shelley 41). These duties are apparently hers and hers alone to undertake, and even though she is grieving she is the comforter to everybody. In short, Elizabeth is also expected to be the angel just as Caroline was before. In response, Victor thinks that "Never was she so enchanting as at this time, when she recalled the sunshine of her smiles and spent them upon us" (Shelley 41). Even though Elizabeth grieves and is in pain, she tries to accept this new role, previously held by Caroline, with joy. There is no indication in the novel that Elizabeth is bitter about her circumstances or the patriarchal expectations. Meanwhile Victor simply admires her and her self-sacrificing qualities. Elizabeth is now tied to the house of Frankenstein as the caretaker, housewife and motherly figure for William, the youngest of the Frankenstein children, because Victor is too busy studying.

Justine, the servant in the Frankenstein house, is described as "exquisitely beautiful" and "tranquil" by Victor, who here again refers to women using patriarchal ideals. Justine continues to be an angel, to use Gilbert and Gubar's term, by being a motherly figure like Caroline. Justine nurses her own mother, Elizabeth's aunt, and also helps to take care of William. Once William is murdered by the Creature, the Creature plants a picture William had on him in Justine's pocket. Justine is therefore blamed for the murder and put on trial. Elizabeth is devastated by the news of William's death. Alphonse Frankenstein, Victor and William's father, describes how Elizabeth "weeps continually, and accuses herself unjustly as the cause of his death ..." (Shelley 79). Again, Elizabeth is prone to sacrificial emotions and taking an unnecessary amount of responsibility. During Justine's trial, Elizabeth addresses the court in order to save Justine. Elizabeth fails to help Justine in any way but this action is

important nonetheless because contrary to the passivity expected of women she tries to act to save Justine, and she does so outside of the home, in the public (and male) environment of the courtroom. Elizabeth acknowledges this fact saying in court that “it may therefore be judged indecent in me to come forward on this occasion” (Shelley 94) and she continues to argue that Justine is innocent.

Justine falsely confesses to committing the murder because she is Catholic: ‘I did confess, but I confessed a lie. I confessed, that I might obtain absolution; but now that falsehood lies heavier at my heart than all my other sins. The God of heaven forgive me!’ (Shelley 97). She was pushed into this decision by her confessor who is referred to as a “he” (Shelley 97). The confessor threatened Justine with going to hell if she continues to obdurate. Justine’s life may have been saved if Victor had addressed the court instead of Elizabeth: while the patriarchal system pressured Justine into confessing to a crime which she did not commit, as a man, Victor’s word would have carried more weight than Elizabeth’s. Moreover, Victor suspects from the start the Creature is responsible for the murder of his brother, but he does not testify or say anything about his suspicions, and Justine is executed for murdering William. Victor is instead concerned about himself in the middle of Justine’s death sentence although he is completely aware that she is innocent:

I believed in her innocence; I knew it. Could the demon who had (I did not for a minute doubt) murdered my brother also in his hellish sport have betrayed the innocent to death and ignominy? I could not sustain the horror of my situation, and when I perceived that the popular voice and the countenances of the judges had already condemned my unhappy victim, I rushed out of the court in agony. The tortures of the accused did not equal mine; she was sustained by innocence, but the fangs of remorse tore my bosom and would not forgo their hold. (95)

Victor never endangers his own position by speaking up for Justine even though he most likely would have had a much better chance at saving Justine than Elizabeth. So while Elizabeth is active in vouching for Justine’s innocence, Victor remains passive instead of taking responsibility for the Creature’s deeds. It is also worth noting that Victor believes that his anxiety is more important than Justine’s death sentence. This indicates how solid the traditional gender roles are in the novel’s society.

Elizabeth continues to sacrifice her own happiness to make sure Victor is happy. In one of her letters she wishes nothing but Victor’s well-being: “Do not let this letter disturb you; do not answer tomorrow, or the next day, or even until you come, if it will give you pain ... and if I

see but one smile on your lips when we meet, occasioned by this or any other exertion of mine, I shall need no other happiness” (Shelley 231) and continues to ask nothing in return. Elizabeth’s ultimate sacrifice comes when she is murdered by the Creature. Indirectly, she can be said to be killed by Victor, since he is responsible for the Creature’s existence and unhappiness. Victor believes that the Creature hunts him because of the Creature’s vow to “be with you on your wedding-night” (Shelley 206). Yet, as seen previously, Victor cares only for himself, and “took every precaution to defend my person in case the fiend should openly attack me” (Shelley 236). He therefore leaves Elizabeth alone in their bed even though he is the only one who is armed and aware that the Creature is nearby. Because of Victor’s self-centredness which corresponds to typically patriarchal ways of making a priority out of men’s needs at the expense of the needs of women, yet another female character dies unnecessarily. Elizabeth, Justine and Caroline all die because they are self-sacrificing women who try to please others rather than themselves. All of them represent Gilbert and Gubar’s angel dichotomy in order to fit into traditional patriarchal gender roles, and all of them die because of this. Gilbert and Gubar refer to Virginia Woolf and argue that in order for women to be free the aesthetic ideal of women must be killed, more specifically “the angel in the house” must be killed (17). Elizabeth, Justine and Caroline all represent angels who reside and live their lives in the house and are literally killed to show the reader that a different kind of life is more rewarding for women - A life that is not supported by traditional gender roles.

So far I have analysed Victor and the characters surrounding him and will move on to the Creature and the De Lacey family. The Creature’s perspective gives readers insight into unawareness of traditional gender roles. The Creature learns ethical codes and gender norms by observation only. When the Creature observes the De Lacey family, he learns to speak and starts to understand social codes, and he also learns the value of making others happy at the cost of his own convenience, which certainly is a conventionally feminine trait: “I had been accustomed, during the night, to steal a part of their store for my own consumption; but when I found that in doing this I inflicted pain on the cottagers, I abstained, and satisfied myself with berries, nuts, and roots, which I gathered from a neighbouring wood” (Shelley 129). The Creature plans to attempt to join De Lacey’s at some point, but says “I imagined that they would be disgusted, until, by my gentle demeanour and conciliating words, I should first win their favour, and afterwards their love” (Shelley 134). The Creature is therefore the only non-female character who is not driven by quests for scientific renown, but by love. The Creature shows his capacity to learn what are conventionally deemed feminine values. This also shows

that the Creature, being free from social norms and patriarchal standards, appreciates and accepts feminine customs even when studying both genders which indicates that feminine norms are to be considered, and sometimes prioritised, in a patriarchal society. The Creature does not conform to the ideology of traditional gender roles and this is likely the reason why he also survives throughout the novel.

Furthermore, the Creature's destructive way of being, as he murders plenty of characters, is an effect of Victor's inability to care, nurture and love. These qualities seem to reside in the female characters of the novel, in almost exaggerated fashion. The Creature's vengeance consists of murdering Elizabeth, Justine, William and Henry Clerval, a childhood friend of Victor. The Creature's reasoning after murdering William is "not I, but she, shall suffer; the murder I have committed because I am forever robbed of all that she could give me, she shall atone. The crime had its source in her; be hers the punishment! Thanks to the lessons of Felix and the sanguinary laws of man, I had learned now to work mischief" (Shelley 172). The Creature's primary goal is to punish Victor for the misery he has been forced to endure and he therefore continues to murder the characters close to Victor as if they are an extension or prop of Victor. The Creature's actions are a reaction to the lack of love which symbolises that femininity is a necessity for life.

At one point in the story the Creature's desire and request is a female creature to accompany him. A possible reason for this request is because of the Creature's analysis of the relationship between Safie and Felix. Safie is a character who is only included for a brief time but manages to offer greatly to the reader. Felix De Lacey is the son of the De Lacey family. The Creature is concerned about why Felix is miserable "My thoughts now became more active, and I longed to discover the motives and feelings of these lovely creatures; I was inquisitive to know why Felix appeared so miserable and Agatha so sad" (Shelley 134). The concern is most likely because this is an emotion the Creature can relate to since he has been hunted by the scared and angry villagers. Felix's mood changes when he meets Safie, an exiled stranger from a different country, "Felix seemed ravished with delight when he saw her, every trait of sorrow vanished from his face, and it instantly expressed a degree of ecstatic joy, of which I could hardly have believed it capable ..." (Shelley 137). Immediately after Felix kisses Safie's hand he declares ownership of her by saying "his sweet Arabian" (Shelley 137). Safie and the Creature share common ground in the sense that they are both adrift and homeless. Both of them need to be loved and cared for. However, it is only Safie who manages to fulfil this need, because she is beautiful and caring and is invited into the De Lacey family. This

shows that being a beautiful and caring woman is rewarded while being the opposite is punished which displays how patriarchal society prioritises the angel attributes rather than the monster attributes. The Creature tries to act nicely to the De Lacey's by performing small tasks around the house without their knowledge. These acts are not enough however and once the De Lacey's notice the Creature they chase him off.

Additionally, Felix serves a male role model to the Creature because while spying on the De Lacey family, he learns how males operate. Felix is kind and gentle which the Creature relates to as he is kind and gentle himself, at least at first. However, while Felix and Felix's sister Agatha are out the Creature tries to talk to their father. The father is blind and unable to be affected by the Creature's wretched appearance. It goes well until the children, Felix and Agatha, come back to the cottage and force the Creature away. This hurts the Creature greatly because he notes Felix's betrayal as if they had a personal relationship. Near the end of the novel the Creature says to Robert, "Was there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me? Why do you not hate Felix, who drove his friend from his door with contumely?" (Shelley 275). This betrayal lingers within the Creature because he felt a strong bond to Felix who is a role model in a way Victor obviously is not. What is curious about this is that Felix is the only name the Creature mentions when confronting Robert in the end. This indicates that Felix is the most important male character to the Creature because Felix is the only male character not subjected to stereotypical gender roles or scientific endeavours.

The Creature, being miserable, wants to be happy and decides, by having studied Felix, that a woman is needed for happiness. The Creature therefore requests a female for himself to which Victor reluctantly agrees. Victor considers this request while beginning his project: "I was now about to form another being of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness ... and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal" (Shelley 202). What Victor fears is a female creature who will become as powerful as the Creature, a scenario which according to Victor is more terrifying than the original creature. Victor also feels threatened because of the risk that the female creature, with a thinking and reasoning mind on her own, will not be controlled by the male creature. Victor further fears the female creature's capacity to reproduce and the consequences of this.

Therefore Victor destroys the female creature before she is awakened. This is to the great dismay of the Creature who vows vengeance. The Creature is upset because he is aware that

his existence is doomed to be alone. What Victor truly fears, however, is a woman liberated from the social structures intended to keep women under control. Traditional gender roles would not apply to the female creature, resulting in a female creature who is free to decide whatever she wants and who is also physically stronger than normal men.

I will continue to analyse the characters Safie and the Creature, as they share and differ in quite a few areas. Safie, an Arab woman, is first described by the common feminine traits, she has a “musical” voice with “hair of a shining raven black, and curiously braided; her eyes were dark, but gentle, although animated; her features of a regular proportion, and her complexion wondrously fair, each cheek tinged with a lovely pink” (Shelley 136-137) which is an antithesis of how the Creature is described. The Creature is first described with “he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks” (Shelley 59) instead of the musical voice, and “His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black” (Shelley 58) instead of complexion wondrously fair and black and braided hair. Safie is however more than just described as beautiful. Safie is the only female character presented who is not killed. I believe that is the case because she is also the only female character breaking some of the patriarchal norms of the novel. Safie and the Creature seem like the opposite when comparing appearance, however they are rather alike. They share the same aspiration of being part of the De Lacey family because they both want to belong somewhere. Both of them have feminine qualities of being kind and gentle. However, the privileges of physical beauty are obvious when Safie is welcomed to the family when the Creature is not. This shows that society is patriarchal in the sense that it focuses heavily on the appearance. As previously mentioned, Tyson argues that women must be regarded as “beautiful ...” (89) in order to be valued. Women that are considered beautiful function as an object in order to impress other men (Tyson 102). Patriarchy focuses on appearance where there obviously are other values to be appreciated.

Despite the differences in their appearance, the Creature and Safie share similar stories. Although she is a woman, Safie is a traveller. Travelling or exploring is a male norm throughout the novel, with male characters travelling while the female characters reside at home. Safie therefore defies gender expectations. Safie, being a foreigner, is also educated enough to understand French. Education is predominantly a male aspiration in the novel, as it was in early nineteenth-century society, and education is always spoken of in relation to male characters. Gilbert and Gubar argues that writing, reading and thinking are male activities and also inimical to women (8). Safie is the only female character who is actively being educated,

along with the Creature who is hiding. Safie helps the De Lacey family financially: “Felix and Agatha spent more time in amusement and conversation, and were assisted in their labours by servants” (Shelley 156). They are not rich but apparently wealthy enough to afford servants. Before travelling, it is also noted that Safie’s mother taught her “... to aspire to higher powers of intellect and an independence of spirit forbidden to the female followers of Muhammad” (Shelley 146). This shows that the female presence of a maternal figure, raised in freedom (Shelley 146), teaches Safie to aspire to intelligence and independence even though it is not their custom. Safie rebels against what is expected of her and leaves to stay with the De Lacey family. Safie made a choice for herself, the opposition of every other female character in the novel. Safie is what Gilbert and Gubar would call a monster as she does not conform to traditional gender stereotypes and therefore also rejects patriarchy, Safie is also the only woman in the novel to do this and survives. Safie’s social status is what enables her to break traditional gender roles. According to Esther K. Mbithi Safie is the perfect instrument to expose hypocrisies to nineteenth-century Europe, without antagonizing the readers (44). Safie is not a European and much less of a noble woman, therefore not pointing critique directly to the readers. Since Safie is not part of the society she has fled to there are no expectations either. The other female characters were already subjected by traditional gender roles. This indicates how an arguably minor character shows a successful life that is not dependent on traditional gender roles. After all, the other female characters that conform to traditional gender roles die.

Lastly, I will analyse nature’s impact in relation to the characters. Nature is feminized throughout the novel and Victor for example refers to nature using a feminine pronoun while pursuing “nature to her hiding-places” (Shelley 55). There are several examples in the beginning of the novel where nature is described in positive terms. “The very winds whispered in soothing accents, and maternal Nature bade me weep no more” (Shelley 108) or “... from an old and beautiful oak ...” (Shelley 37) are some examples and there are more that describe the seasons, lakes and tempests in similar fashion. Nature is described in the same way as women, and Victor especially describes women as beautiful. The female characters are arguably passive and supportive to an almost exaggerated level. The actions of nature are also feminine in soothing Victor’s mind much like Caroline and Elizabeth take care of him. Since Victor is a stereotypical patriarchal male wanting to control females around him he tries to conquer nature as well. The Creature is also aided by nature which provides food, shelter and water to him. Meena Alexander argues that Victor’s project is a “circumvention of normal

sexuality and procreation” (128) in which “the laboratory has taken the place of the womb” (128) and lightning symbolises the spark of giving birth.

However, nature does not only show similarities to the passive and docile females but is also a force of power in the novel. Mellor argues that Victor “steals” (355) the power of reproduction by using electricity to give life to the Creature. This is the turning point where nature takes revenge on Victor. Flashes of lightning (Shelley 83) help the Creature to appear reminding Victor of his neglected responsibilities. During one rainy day Victor decides to travel to the summit of Montanvert in order to feel better by viewing the beautiful scenery and comments on the current weather as “What were rain and storm to me?” (Shelley 110) as if mocking nature. Near the end of the novel, Victor ends up in a barren, fruitless and miserable location in the Arctic. This resembles an antithesis to the Creature’s relation to the scenery as Victor is continually being punished by nature for not taking responsibility. The Creature tells Victor “Follow me; I seek the everlasting ices of the north, where you will feel the misery of cold and frost, to which I am impassive” (Shelley 253). The Creature makes it sound as if Victor has never felt that kind of cold and misery before which is true. Victor has always been taken care of with love and care by the female characters. This is the opposite of the Creature’s upbringing which is why he now is impassive to the cold and misery. This relation to nature is also supported by the fact that the Creature tries to lead Victor into this cold and desolate place. The Creature wants Victor to feel what it is like to be him. Without any females to care for Victor there is only cold wasteland left. Therefore nature represents the unappreciated female qualities that strike back once Victor has taken actions too far which ultimately leads to his demise. Robert shares similar consequences because he is stuck in ice by being a self-absorbed adventurer recklessly ambitious trying to achieve glory.

In conclusion, Elizabeth, Justine and Caroline all die because they are self-sacrificing females trying to please others rather than themselves. These female characters’ position in society is in the home, as mothers or housewives while the men all work outside the home as merchants, scientists or explorers. Victor, the main protagonist, lacks all female qualities and is therefore also punished by the means of the Creature’s vengeance. Both Victor and Robert seem to share a lack of responsibility and the same kind of ambitions. Both of them end up in troubling situations as well: Robert is stuck in ice and Victor is going mad. This shows the reader what the consequences are of conforming in almost exaggerated fashion to the expectations of either gender. Safie is the only exception among the female characters. She has all the feminine attributes among several male attributes and shows the reader that a

strong, independent woman can still find happiness and success. It is important to note that Safie is extreme in the respect of being the opposite of every other female character which is likely why she survives. In this way, *Frankenstein* shows readers that accepting traditional gender roles is a death sentence. The fact that Safie, the only monster, thrives throughout the novel, shows that acting contrary to patriarchal beliefs is rewarding.

The Creature, unaffected by traditional gender roles, tries to find a role model. This is because that responsibility lies with Victor, who has rejected it. This ultimately leaves the Creature in a void of obsession to destroy everything that his original role model loves. Once Elizabeth, and everyone close to Victor, is murdered, Victor is in the same void as the Creature because he is as alone as the Creature. Nature symbolises the maternal function of catering to the needs of the characters as it soothes, and provides food and shelter. Without such maternal aids however, nature can also be a cold and desolate place, as it is at the North Pole where the Creature and Victor end up. Femininity and maternal attributes are needed in order to survive, and Victor literally dies because he lacks these attributes.

Traditional gender roles are highlighted by only using male narrators who barely pay attention to the female characters in the novel. The focus is instead on their ambitions. The women are absent and barely heard of, and Victor often only remarks on their physical appearance. This gives readers an idea how insignificant women are according to the male characters. Victor even goes as far as to destroy his female creation before giving her life because he could not accept the possible terrors of a female creature that had a mind and independence. My contention is that the text presents a feminist perspective and a critique of traditional gender roles in *Frankenstein* by punishing and killing the characters that follow them while the few exceptions live. In this way, *Frankenstein* manages to criticize society because of traditional gender roles.

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