

Gendered Exclusion in *Frankenstein*: Depicting the Marginalization of Women

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Abstract:

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a seminal work that not only delves into the realms of science and ethics but also offers a critical perspective on societal norms and gender roles. This paper explores the theme of the elimination of women in the novel, examining how female characters are portrayed and their significance in reflecting the gender dynamics of the time. By analyzing the roles of women, the paper sheds light on how their absence or subordination is intricately tied to the overarching narrative and themes of the novel. By analyzing the significance of women's deaths, their impact on the narrative, and the underlying themes of power and inequality, this study unveils the complex ways in which the novel both reflects and challenges prevailing gender norms of its time. The absence and elimination of women in *Frankenstein* provide an avenue for examining the complexities of women's agency, the consequences of subordination, and the potential for subversion within a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Gender roles, patriarchy, traditional norms, women, power dynamics, marginalization.

Introduction: Contextualizing Gender Dynamics

Mary Shelley's iconic novel *Frankenstein*, published in 1818, is more than a tale of scientific creation; it encapsulates a complex web of themes that mirror the socio-cultural milieu of the early 19th century. Among these themes, the representation of women and their elimination within the narrative holds a particularly intriguing and thought-provoking position. The absence of female voices, their often-passive roles, and their symbolic deaths reveal a tapestry of gender dynamics that were prevalent during Shelley's time. Through the lens of these female characters, the novel provides a critical reflection on the societal norms and expectations that shaped women's lives. This paper embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the theme of the elimination of women in *Frankenstein*, aiming to unveil the layers of meaning embedded in their representation, absence, and significance within the narrative.

Literature Review:

Scholarly engagement with the portrayal of women in *Frankenstein* has been abundant, with researchers delving into the nuances of their roles, absence, and treatment within the narrative. Numerous studies have underscored the ways in which Mary Shelley's female characters, such as Elizabeth Lavenza, Justine Moritz, and Caroline Beaufort, exemplify conventional gender roles of their era. Poovey (1984) examines the concept of the "proper lady" and how the female characters in the novel embody or deviate from this ideal.

The erasure of women's voices and experiences, especially in the context of scientific and intellectual endeavors, has been a subject of particular interest. Mellor (1988) explores the extent to which Mary Shelley's own experiences as a woman in a literary and intellectual family could

have influenced the gender dynamics portrayed in the novel. Smith (2005) offers insights into the domestication of landscapes and how it intersects with the domestication of women, shedding light on the limited spheres within which women were often confined.

Beyond the immediate portrayal of women, scholars have also examined the implications of the elimination of women within the narrative. By analyzing the roles of female characters as well as their symbolic deaths, these studies unveil the underlying power structures and patriarchal norms that framed their lives. The absence of a strong female creator, paralleling Victor Frankenstein's scientific ambitions, underscores the limited agency that women were afforded in shaping their destinies.

While past research has provided valuable insights into the gender dynamics within *Frankenstein*, this paper aims to contribute to the existing discourse by delving deeper into the significance of women's elimination as a reflection of society. By analyzing the connections between women's roles, their absence, and the broader implications for power dynamics and societal norms, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted portrayal of women in *Frankenstein*.

Research Methodology:

To comprehensively explore the representation of the elimination of women in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a mixed-methods approach combining textual analysis and literary criticism will be employed. This approach will allow for a deep examination of the roles, absence, and significance of female characters within the novel, as well as the broader implications of their representation. Close reading of the novel's key sections will involve identifying patterns in language, character interactions, and narrative choices. This analysis aims to uncover the portrayal of women, their agency, and their significance in relation to the broader themes of the novel.

Roles of Female Characters: Conformity and Subordination

The female characters in *Frankenstein* largely conform to the gender norms of the early 19th century. Elizabeth Lavenza, for instance, is portrayed as the idealized woman, embodying virtues of domesticity and purity. Justine Moritz, in contrast, becomes a victim of societal injustice due to her lack of protection and agency as a woman. Caroline Beaufort's sacrifice as a mother reflects the limited scope of female roles, with her nurturing nature overshadowing other potentials.

Mary Shelley explores her personal concerns and ideas about conception, childbirth, and infant development in *Frankenstein*. One interpretation of *Frankenstein* is that it is a story of what happens when a man tries to have a kid without a woman. However, it can also be seen as a woman's portrayal of her fears and misgivings over her own creative and reproductive capacities. The book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar also references the terms "angel" and "monster." These terms, in essence, reflect whether a woman conforms to societal gender norms. A "monster" embodies traits of violence, aggression, worldliness, and virginity, while an "angel" represents gentleness, meekness, and an almost ethereal and unsettling quality. There are

numerous alternative feminist analyses of *Frankenstein*, such as those by Anne K. Mellor and Rosemary Hathaway, who both argue that Victor's greatest crimes may be his violation of domesticity.

The Monster's Creation and Female Companionship

The absence of a female creator parallels the absence of powerful female voices in the novel. The monster's demand for a female companion and Victor's reluctance to create one highlights the significance of female companionship, even if it remains unrealized. This reflects a yearning for a balance between masculine and feminine elements in a world dominated by the former.

The initial rationale behind Victor Frankenstein's rejection of creating a companion for the monster stemmed from his fear that the two beings might procreate, giving rise to an entirely new species. While an ideal scenario would involve the creatures developing affection for one another, it's more plausible for the female creature to be drawn to refined men rather than the grotesque being. Victor makes this point in the twentieth chapter; "They might even hate each other...she also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man; she might quit him, and he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species." (106) If the female companion regards the creature with distaste, this would cause more anguish for the creature as he would be shunned by his own kind. In turn, this would cause the creature to seek vengeance and may murder more innocent humans.

Symbolism of Women's Deaths: Society's Consequences

The symbolic deaths of female characters carry weighty meanings. Justine's unjust execution reflects the vulnerability of women in the face of societal judgment. Elizabeth's death represents the ultimate cost of Victor's unchecked ambition, demonstrating the destructive consequences of his scientific endeavors. These deaths echo broader societal consequences when women are subordinated and denied agency. Justine Moritz's execution is a stark portrayal of the societal consequences of blind judgment and the suppression of women's voices. Falsely accused of murder, she becomes a victim of societal prejudice that conveniently aligns with her perceived guilt due to her lower class status and lack of agency. Her execution unveils the dangers of unchecked power and the willingness of society to sacrifice innocent lives to maintain the facade of justice. Justine's death underscores the pervasive inequities of a society where the plight of marginalized women goes unaddressed. Shelley in this instances emphasizes on men's preference to do what works best for their own benefits rather than choosing to do what's right to save a helpless women.

After Elizabeth father's death she becomes severely poor and homeless and there is no one to take care of her except Victor's father who happens to be her father's friend. In the novel, Victor's father is depicted as "a protecting spirit to the poor girl, who committed herself to his care" (*Frankenstein*, 23). Shelley, here emphasizes on woman's weakness and helplessness when they are alone and how the only protection they have is from men.

The monster says to Victor: "I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself: the gratification is small, but it is all that I can receive, and it shall content me. It is true we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world: but on that account we shall be more attached to one

another.” (*Frankenstein*, 93) And by this, the female monster’s destiny would be determined before her birth, just like Elizabeth’s destiny of marrying Victor which was determined by others since her early childhood.

Patriarchal Society and Marginalization:

The portrayal of women's elimination is closely tied to the patriarchal society depicted in the novel. Victor Frankenstein's ambition and pursuit of scientific knowledge overshadow the lives of the women around him. His creation, the Monster, indirectly causes the deaths of Elizabeth and Justine, emphasizing the collateral damage women suffer due to male ambition. Furthermore, the framing of the story through letters addressed to Margaret Saville reinforces the marginalization of women's voices, as Margaret serves as a silent recipient of the narrative. Although not directly involved in the main narrative, Margaret Saville is the recipient of the letters that frame the story, serving as an example of women's marginalized presence. Margaret's role is passive; she is a silent observer of events, emblematic of how women's voices were often silenced or ignored in societal discourse. Her marginalization reflects the broader pattern of women's limited influence and participation in intellectual and narrative spheres. The actions of both Victor and the Monster contribute to the elimination of women in the novel. Victor's unchecked ambition, driven by the patriarchal desire for power and glory, leads to the creation of the Monster and the ensuing tragedy. The Monster, rejected by its creator and society due to its appearance, seeks to eliminate women in Victor's life as a form of vengeance. This cycle of violence highlights the consequences of unchecked masculinity and the disregard for the well-being of women.

Victor states in his letter that “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.” (*Frankenstein*, 25)

From this, she is just expected to do what others want her to do. one assumes that Elizabeth’s love for Victor results from the family’s expectations of their future marriage and the fact that they spent most of their times together before he took off to university. Having no other choice, she waits for Victor until he finally returns to Geneva and decides to marry her. Unluckily, her long waiting doesn’t really pay off as she was murdered by the monster on her wedding night.

Conclusion

By examining the ways in which women were eliminated in *Frankenstein*, readers are encouraged to reflect on ongoing efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable society. In conclusion, the representation of the elimination of women in *Frankenstein* underscores the pervasive influence of patriarchal society during the Romantic era. Through the fates of Elizabeth, Justine, and Margaret, Mary Shelley provides a powerful commentary on the consequences of limiting women's agency and relegating them to subservient roles. The novel's

exploration of these themes remains a pertinent reminder of the need to challenge and reshape societal norms to create a more just and balanced world.

The conventional roles assigned to genders are accentuated through the deliberate choice of male narrators, who scarcely acknowledge the female characters within the novel. Rather, the narrative emphasizes the ambitions of the male characters, sidelining and scarcely mentioning the women. Victor, the protagonist, frequently comments solely on the physical attributes of the women, exemplifying the insignificance assigned to them from the perspective of the male characters. Notably, Victor's rejection of his female creation without granting her life underscores his aversion to the notion of an independent female entity possessing intellect and autonomy. The central argument put forth is that the text articulates a feminist standpoint and engages in critiquing established gender norms in *Frankenstein* through the punishment and demise of characters adhering to these norms, while allowing a few exceptions to endure. This approach allows *Frankenstein* to convey a critical stance towards societal expectations dictated by traditional gender roles.

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