

Tara Volz

- 1.) This paper is addressing the function of Shelley's *Frankenstein* in regards to the society during the 19th century in England. It specifically tackles whether or not the novel can be viewed as a feminist text, while tackling critics so so that it can't.
- 2.) It's important to understand how much Shelley was influenced by the society around her. There was much debate about the role of women (whether private or public) during the time period, so its interesting to look at the literature produced by female authors at the time, in order to discern their perspective and understand the social revolutions that took place.
- 3.) The goal of the paper is to argue that this novel did serve as a critique of the patriarchal society of the time.

Strengths: Clear argument for the paper, lots of outside materials,

Weaknesses: I'm not sure if the paper would make sense to the average reader (because it very focused on this particular subject matter and terminology).

2 questions:

- 1.) Is my argument clear to whoever is reading this?
- 2.) Does my organization, or the way I set up my argument, flow naturally?

Abstract:

This argumentative essay is examining the function of Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, in regards to the larger social context surrounding Nineteenth Century British Romantic Literature. Critics have suggested that Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a text that functions as suppressing women and playing into gender stereotypes. However, I argue that Shelley's novel goes against those biased female stereotypes, and works to critique a patriarchal society.

This essay was written about a year ago, for my Women in Literature class. This course focused on examining the differences between male authored and female authored works in England during the 19th century period of Romanticism. We also studied the cultural and social standards of the period, specifically in regards to the role of women in both the private and public sphere. For this essay we were encourage to curate our own argument of how a particular text, in my case Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), could have been viewed by society at the time of its production.

Frankenstein: Giving Life to Feminism

Women writers of the Romantic Era often used literature as a form for reimagining the constructed gender inequalities that were present, not only in their daily lives, but in published works by male authors of the time, Wordsworth and Burke being of two examples. Mary Shelley, notable daughter of the esteemed feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, was one of these female British Romantic authors. In 1818, she crafted the novel *Frankenstein* which can be interpreted as an embodiment of feminism. Critics, such as Johanna Smith, have argued that her portrayal of passive female characters in the novel only gives into those biased stereotypes, making the text more male than female oriented. However, by allowing the women to be secondary, the reader is able to glimpse into the minds of the male characters, specifically Victor, whose disastrous motherhood only serves to critique a patriarchal society. Therefore, *Frankenstein* functions as a feminist text through re-examining Victor's lack of maternal qualities throughout the process of his creation.

An early feminist reading of *Frankenstein* is carried out by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their study entitled *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. In chapter six of their study "Horror Twins: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve", they look underneath the surface of this male dominating work, to analyze *Frankenstein* as a rewrite of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. This interpretation allows both Victor and his creation to represent femaleness. This female quality comes in many forms such as anxiety and resistance to patriarchal oppression. According to Gilbert and Gubar, Victor *Frankenstein* does waiver back and forth between acting Adamic and Satanic. His sheltered and innocent childhood, always being protected and guided by his father, is similar to Adam. However, he transitions into Satan when his scientific research and desire to overrule nature in

Comment [BH1]: This first sentence is a little long... consider shortening or breaking it up 😊

Comment [BH2]: After reading through the entire paper, I realized this argument/claim isn't touched on again – the central argument that's discussed later on is much stronger, and I'd suggest introducing that in your intro/thesis instead (so consider revising or deleting this phrase)

Comment [BH3]: Consider rewording, because this phrase might be confusing for readers – I accidentally took it to mean the relationship between Victor and HIS mother, rather than a description of Victor's attitude toward his creation

Comment [BH4]: Something to think about... How does this represent feminism?
*You get into this later in the paper, but it's not mentioned in your thesis – consider revising the thesis to highlight those really great arguments/conclusions you make in the final paragraphs.

Comment [BH5]: This might be a great place to insert a quick description/summary of *Paradise Lost* – it could give readers helpful information to follow along. (As someone who has not read *Paradise Lost*, I didn't understand how you came to this conclusion.)

Comment [BH6]: Consider revising for consistency – later in the paper, you mention that Gilbert and Gubar analyze the text "Biblically," and I think using that particular term in this section would help readers understand your point (i.e. that Victor acts "Adamic" and "Satanic")

animating life begin to consume Victor. While Victor seems to oscillate between Adam and Satan, Gilbert and Gubar's larger claim is that Victor's "single and most crucial and self-defining act transforms him into Eve, the "Mother of Mankind"" (Gilbert and Gubar 58). Victor goes through this artificial pregnancy in which he isolates himself inside of his laboratory, anxious and feverish, and ultimately gives birth to his creation. Through this "childbirth" his character is more largely possessed by female behaviors.

Not only does Victor show similarities to Eve, but his creation holds striking similarities to female qualities and attitudes. The creature is ostracized from the start by his creator and then later on by the public society. His intellect comes from the books he happens upon at the DeLacey's, which were *Werter*, *Plutarch's Lives*, and *Paradise Lost*. Each of these literary text "embody lessons that a female author (or monster) must learn about about a male-dominated society" (Gilbert and Gubar 63). These texts functioned as conduct books that were typically used to guide female behaviors. In this instance, it seems that the male monster might seem more female after all. There is also the Miltonic ideal that women are either monstrous, angelic, or a bit of both. Eve is seen, by others and herself, as a mixture of being both spiritually divine, yet vile and degraded. Similarly, the creature shares this commonality. When he catches sight of his reflection at the lake he notes how he was "terrified... unable to believe it was I reflected in the mirror" (Shelley 98). The monster here, shares the same physical and moral self-loathing that Eve had felt herself. Also, this idea of critiquing and examining physical features brings out the femaleness within this male monster. In this analysis of both Victor and the creature, Gilbert and Gubar are claiming that *Frankenstein* is indeed a feminist text, in that even the male characters embody more aspects of female rather than masculine qualities, which in turn challenges patriarchal societies.

Comment [BH7]: Consider revising to strengthen your point – tie it back to your thesis / main idea – HOW do these "female behaviors" contribute to an overall feminist message in the book?

Comment [BH8]: Consider rewording, because this might be confusing for readers – someone might misread this as referring to the creation of Victor (rather than referring to the actual thing Victor has created, the monster)

Comment [BH9]: Consider elaborating – a brief explanatory text could be helpful for readers who are unfamiliar with these texts (How and why did these texts function as conduct books?)

Comment [BH10]: Consider rewording for clarity – are you commenting on the "duality" of their characters?

Comment [BH11]: Something to think about... HOW does having "more aspects of female rather than masculine qualities" fit into feminist ideals?

*Just a thought – I think readers would appreciate a definition of feminism up front (a sort of framework for your arguments in the rest of the paper). Consider briefly outlining your definition of feminism.

Not all critics of *Frankenstein* agree with the argument that the novel was written in a feminist light. One such critic who opposes this feminist view is Johanna Smith, a professor at the University of Texas. In her essay “Copped up: Feminine Domesticity”, she analyzes the roles of the female characters within the novel. She examines facets such as behavior, attitudes, and speech, in order to argue that the women in *Frankenstein* are underrepresented and marginalized in comparison to men. Central to *Frankenstein* is the role that Caroline, Justine, and Elizabeth play in the novel. These women are seldom heard from in the novel and since the story is narrated by three males, their opinions and expressions are always told from one of the narrators points of views. Smith notes the way that “no women in the novel speak directly. Everything we hear from them is filtered through three male narrators. (Smith 313). Smith seems to be assessing this lack of female presence as a sign of female inferiority and disparage, which in turn promotes rather than critiques gender inequalities.

Shelley delves initially into the social context of 19th century, the period of time in which Shelley was writing *Frankenstein*. In society during this time, women were “conditioned to think she needed a man’s help” (Smith 275). This stemmed from the social-political limitations imposed on women during this period. In Mellor’s essay “Were Women Writer’s Romantics”, she also notes how women, especially married women, were obligated to their male partners in every aspect of their lives. Before 1860, wives in England followed the “Couverture, in which she has no rights, her body belongs to her husband, and all her personal assets and property now belong to her husband (Mellor 397). According to Smith, the way the women are so weakly portrayed shows how they only serve to reflect the male characters. In her essay, she claims that “women function not I their own right but rather as signals and conduits for men’s relations with

Comment [BH12]: Do you mean Smith? ☺

other men” (Smith 283). Therefore, women aren’t active subjects in the novel but are merely pieces of a game in which the men manipulate to even out a score.

While Smith views the female roles as limitations in the novel, I believe that their secondary roles serve as a critique of Victor’s male gaze. The novel employs three male narrators, whom through their perspectives only, are the women portrayed and represented. Victor Frankenstein is guilty of describing the female characters through his biased male gaze. When the reader is first introduced to Elizabeth by Victor, when they are children, he describes her as “the beautiful and adored companion of all [his] occupations and [his] pleasures” (Shelley 21). His mother accordingly presented “Elizabeth to [Victor] as her promised gift... and looked upon Elizabeth as mine”. Victor thus sees Elizabeth an object for him to possess and control. Her importance as a woman, as an individual, and as a character, is thus marginally reduced to merely a child’s play toy that can be owned and use to their accord. I believe that describing women in such a way that reduces their importance, isn’t anti-feminist like Smith concludes. Rather, depicting women in that manner makes the novel uniquely feminist, in that *Frankenstein* seems to be directly criticizing the way males view females in the 19th century. So when the females are portrayed without distinct voices, it’s *Frankenstein’s* way of critiquing the male belief that their opinions and voices are more important. Therefore, the novel is attacking and belittling the male gaze. Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure Narrative Cinema”, she looks deeply into societal sexual imbalanced which leads to the term being used here, “male gaze”. Mulvey notes how the women are simultaneously looked at and displayed... for strong visual and erotic impact” (Mulvey 837). The men however, reject that sort of gaze for themselves, so therefore the “narrative supports the man’s role as the active one of forwarding the story” (Mulvey 838). There’s clearly a sexual dichotomy in which narratives portray women

Comment [BH13]: Consider revising for consistency – I don’t believe you’ve used first person prior to this point.

Comment [BH14]: Consider revising for consistency/clarity – Do you want to say that it’s the “book’s [*Frankenstein’s*] way of critiquing” or “author’s [Shelley’s] way of critiquing”?

Comment [BH15]: Consider revising for clarity – readers might be confused by this sentence! I’m not sure I really understand this phrase.

as only objects, while the men are seen as subjects. *Frankenstein*, thus uses Victor to introduce that egocentric male gaze in order to then to highlight how that only leads to his downfall. Victor being the active character and narrator in the story, is thus the only one to blame when his self-centered actions lead to countless innocent murders and eventually his own death.

Furthering my analysis of the novel, I thus agree with critics Gilbert and Gubar, in that *Frankenstein* is a largely feminist text. However rather than analyzing how the text incorporates femaleness through its biblical interpretation like they did, I'm looking at how *Frankenstein* functions as a feminist text through Victor's lack of maternal qualities. At the start of the novel, it's clear Victor is recounting a cautionary tale. A bit further it's revealed that Victor is trying to use science to procreate and animate life into a dead corpse. Although he succeeds in his creation, he ultimately fails at parenting once he brings the creature to life, and it's his lack of motherly instincts that causes this failure and downfall. During the process of his attempting creation, his lack of positive description, is forecasting Victor's lack of compassion during what could be called his "pregnancy". His laboratory was only "a solitary chamber, or rather a cell...separated from from all other apartments" (Shelley 39). Unlike during female pregnancies, Victor clearly wanted to hide away in confined isolation. He was overwhelmed with fear, anxiousness, and sometimes loathing of what he was trying to create. From the beginning, it's clear that Victor didn't hold that maternal compassion, even while he was trying to bring to life this human being that would be like a child to him. Quite surprisingly he would often divulge more emotion for nature than he would his creation. While he viewed his "workshop of filthy creation" (Shelley 39), he adversely viewed the summer months that passed as "a most beautiful season" (40). Victor clearly saw nature as existing and being more astonishing and beautiful than

Comment [BH16]: BAM! This is awesome... you tell the reader WHY you believe the text is feminist. ("...in order to then...")

**This is a central argument.
The text is feminist BECAUSE the author uses the egocentric male gaze of her narrators TO HIGHLIGHT HOW IT ONLY LEADS TO THEIR DOWNFALLS

Comment [BH17]: This phrase might be more appropriate in your second paragraph where you discuss Gilbert and Gubar's argument – if you made the distinction between your argument and theirs up front (in that initial paragraph), it would be less confusing for readers.

Comment [BH18]: Consider revising for clarity – if readers are unfamiliar with the text, they may not realize that Victor is recounting a "cautionary tale" – a brief explanatory sentence could be helpful (how? why?)

Comment [BH19]: This is such an interesting observation – it makes for a really strong argument. Suggestion – consider revising your thesis to state this ultimate point!

his “child”. The novel thus works as a critique of male maternal language though Victor’s character, which ultimately leads to not only his, but his creatures demise in the novel.

It’s also unsurprising that Victor is so uncompassionate in the novel, due to the way in which he tried to make his creation. In his attempt to “give birth”, he ultimately ends up eliminating the role that females function in procreation. Thus, the bond that’s created within the female womb between mother and child, isn’t present between Victor and his creature. Victor doesn’t even go through the effort of naming the thing he creates but rather refers to him as the monster or creature throughout the novel. Not naming the creature, might be an initial excuse for avoiding possession over it, and solidifies Victor’s view of the creature as devoid of human qualities. Therefore, it seems that Victor wanted to take on both male and female roles within himself. However, he eliminated females, but refused to inherit femaleness. Femaleness being that maternal connection between creator and created. As soon as his creature came to life he “escaped and rushed downstairs” (Shelley 43). This portrays Victor as a man who wants **to take responsibility** for creating life from the dead, but doesn’t want to take responsibility for caring for it. Victor is merely a character provoked by egotism and selfish desires for superiority.

Victor’s immediate decision to avoid the consequences and obligations towards his “child”, leads me then to believe that he wanted to create a being that was so abhorrent and grotesque, as an excuse for his maternal abandonment. He was never really concerned with the creature at all, but rather obsessed over creating it. In an article “Responsible Creativity and the “Modernity” of Mary Shelley’s Prometheus”, author Harriet Hustis examines how Frankenstein fails in maternal compassion due to “the fundamental error of the monster’s creation” (Hustis 848). For her, Frankenstein’s submission to such large creative impulses overclouded any true sympathy he should have felt for what he was creating. He was thus overly concerned with

Comment [BH20]: Consider rewording for clarity – the phrasing “to take responsibility” in reference to “creating life from the dead” could trip readers up.

grandeur and not enough with minute details. Victor's "willingness to sacrifice creative precision for "speed" suggests that the creation of life is of purely theoretical interest" (Hustis 849). I would agree with Hustis and even go further to suggest that Frankenstein intentionally **self-sabotaged his creation**. Before he succeeded, Victor Frankenstein proclaimed that if he did "a new species would bless me... many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me" (Shelley 39). Victor seemed so caught up in the idea of male intellectual superiority, that he wanted to create something that would be indebted to him, but not vice-versa. Therefore, if he created a creature that was so grotesque to the human eye, that it didn't even look human at all, he wouldn't feel like he owed any parental responsibilities to the creature. However, it's in his neglect of the maternal, that Victor's power that he thought he was "owed" in animating life, **would ultimately be used against him in taking away everything and everyone he loved.**

Comment [BH21]: Consider rewording for clarity – "self-sabotage" would refer to Victor sabotaging himself – in this case, he's sabotaging his creation

Comment [BH22]: I think it's totally awesome that you're pointing out the consequences of Victor's actions.

Through analyzing women's roles and Victor's presence within the novel, it emphasizes how uniquely *Frankenstein* is able to utilize the male narrators to comment on gender inequalities and patriarchy within the text. The male character's, especially Victor, are plagued by selfish desires for power and superiority. Victor believes he holds power over mankind, by being able to create life, **with the exclusion of female sexuality**. However, **it's soon realized that it is Victor patriarchal ways that end up destroying himself and his family.** *Frankenstein* could possibly have been seen a subtle critique of the society during that time period. The author Shelley, was no stranger to feminine discourse, for her mother Mary Wollstonecraft, argued against female oppression and ways to overcome it in her notorious "Vindication of the Rights of Woman". **Perhaps there is no better way to highlight femaleness, than to allow males to be subjected to their own vices,** a technique that *Frankenstein* doesn't shy away from. This novel

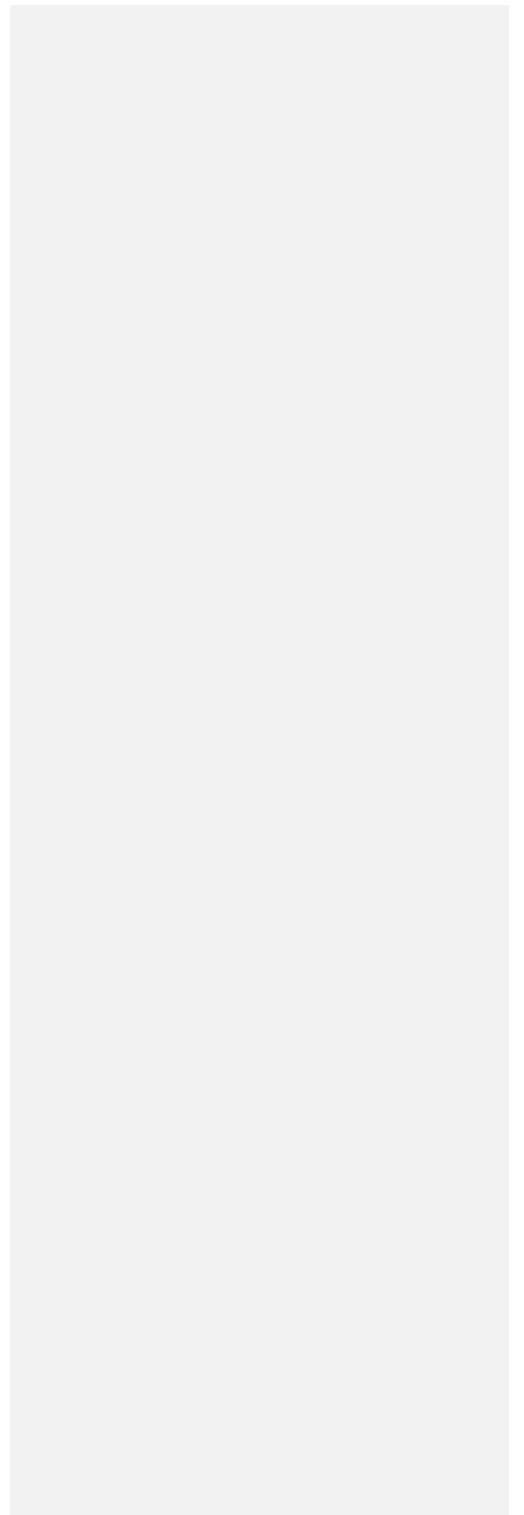
Comment [BH23]: This seems to be another central point – consider tying this into your thesis

Comment [BH24]: Another key point!! I think I'm beginning to understand how this ties into a feminist message – my suggestion would be to make this absolutely clear in your thesis.

Thesis – *This is a feminist text because* ARGUMENT (above = exclusion of female sexuality) RESULTS IN (Victor's downfall) TO MAKE THE POINT THAT (female roles are necessary to societal success)

Comment [BH25]: Love. This. Line.

has been and will continue to be an example of a piece of fiction, so deeply engrained in social realities, that it's importance will remain relevant.



Bibliography

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