

Powerfully passive the contradiction in frankenstein's women

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Frankenstein's women are, as a rule, extremely passive. Their role is generally only to further the plot and be an accessory to the male leads, which from a modern perspective immediately gives the novel a sexist undertone. Safie's only real importance is as a vessel for the English lessons that the monster learns from; Justine is framed for a male character's crimes; Elizabeth waits for Victor until her eventual murder.

Even Margaret, who the letters telling the story were addressed to, exists only to be told the events that Victor has lived through, not to really play a role in them herself. Put together, these facts paint a rather ugly picture.

If Frankenstein had been written by a man, perhaps we could argue that the lack of central female characters was due to ingrained sexism and an inability to really consider women as important. However, Mary Shelley was most definitely a woman, and that forces us to take a deeper look. Although there is a lack of prominent female characters, the emphasis on the mistakes and hubris of the male characters hints more feminist interpretations. The adherence to conventional gender roles and the general sidelining of female characters, instead of being sexist, serves to call attention to the negative qualities of the male characters, illustrate the reliance that men had on women, and highlight real issues that women of the time faced.

While Shelley did not include any major female characters, that isn't necessarily such a bad thing in this particular story. Frankenstein places a heavy focus on the mistakes of men, and certainly doesn't paint many important male characters in a positive light. Victor's hubris, pursuit of glory, and lack of consideration for moral boundaries are among the primary

themes in the novel. This places him as a stark opposite to the women in his life. The author doesn't give female characters much attention, but we're left with a better impression of them than of most of the male characters. In fact, all of the female characters seem to embody high moral standards. The selfless, patience, and kindness that these characters live by are important characteristics of the ideal Victorian woman, and all of the female characters have warm, tender dispositions that make them wonderful caregivers.

Elizabeth in particular is said to continually [endeavor] to contribute to the happiness of others, entirely forgetful of herself (73). Although she is relegated to the background and eventually killed, she is an excellent example of the traditional role of women as maternal, guiding figures. It could be argued that the dichotomy between the prominent but relatively immoral men and the virtuous but little-noticed women is meant to call attention to how much society really needed its women, who would happily work in the background to keep things running smoothly.

A further point towards the necessity of women is, however odd it is to say from a modern perspective, the idea of a man truly needing a woman in his life. When the male characters did not have a female presence in their lives, things tended to go wrong. When Caroline" the primary female influence in Victor's life" died, Elizabeth was the only one who could comfort him; the lonely monster, who had no one to love him, cried in misery that no Eve soothed [his] sorrows, or shared [his] thoughts (145). Both of these characters see women as embodying comfort, acceptance, and fulfillment.

Frankenstein's monster feels that he is somehow incomplete because he lacks a female influence.

The most blatant feminist sentiment in Frankenstein comes into play when Victor chooses not to create a wife for the monster. Victor's entire motivation for refusing to create a female monster is fear" fear of a woman who would be self-assured and have a mind of her own; a woman could not be controlled, perhaps even by the first monster. Would she be headstrong and stubborn, rather than modest and selfless like a proper woman? More importantly, if she were murderous, could they stop her from destroying everything in her path? If she were licentious, would a race of devils be propagated upon the earth (119)?

Victor was finally forced to acknowledge that the creatures he created could have thoughts and needs and personalities, and he didn't like the implications of that. A powerful, sexual woman is far from the norm in Victorian society, and Victor's horror at the idea comes across as less due to a moral rejection and more a reflection of what he sees as a perversion of femininity. In his eyes, women are to be submissive, docile, passive" exactly the opposite of what a second monster could turn out to be, and exactly what most of the women in his life have been. This is one of the few times when Shelley is so blatant in her feminism, and is probably the best argument for a feminist interpretation of Frankenstein.

Perhaps the female characters seem sidelined simply because this isn't their story. Unlike in modern times, Victorian men and women were said to occupy

separate spheres, only rarely meeting and interacting; perhaps it simply seemed natural to Shelley and to readers at the time that a story about men would include relatively little interaction with women, just as a story about women would have few prominent male characters.

Frankenstein's portrayal of women is largely up to interpretation, but I believe that Shelley's agenda was primarily to illustrate the importance of traditional female roles and highlight the problems in the male view of those same roles. Many feminist texts emphasize the importance of breaking free from what women were supposed to do; however, I think that Shelley was making a different point by reminding us that those roles aren't inherently bad, and that they are actually necessary to a functional society. People with the willingness to forsake the spotlight and support others are crucial to keeping a home, community, or country running, and Shelley's women, while not the most prominent or plot-relevant of characters, are an excellent example of those more traditional ideals.