

Frankenstein and the modern pandora

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



On 1 January 1818, Mary Shelley birthed her hideous progeny into the world. One of the enduring tales of modern literature, Frankenstein is the narrative of a scientist who creates monstrous life. Robbing both cemeteries and slaughterhouses in his single-minded, egoistic quest to circumvent the natural order.

But, in doing so, he ensures the destruction of his wife, his best friend, his maid, and his baby brother. By the end of the novel, he becomes so exhausted by his own hubris and the consequences it has wrought, that he dies at an early age. Conceived at a time when women were considered the property of their male benefactors and pushed to the margins of society, Frankenstein exemplifies the degree to which women were at the mercy of male whims and egos.

Much has been written about the link connecting Victor Frankenstein to the mythological figure of Prometheus. The subtitle of Shelley's novel being *The Modern Prometheus*, scholars have drawn parallels between them regarding the creation of life, the revealing of forbidden knowledge, and the subsequent eternal punishment. So too should they draw parallels to the adjacent myth of Pandora. From Hesiod's *Theogony*, we know that Pandora was the first human woman constructed by Hephaestus at the behest of Zeus. So insulted was Zeus by Prometheus' insolence in revealing the secret of fire to man, that he commissioned the creation of a being whose sole purpose was to be an unwitting instrument for revenge. Much like Elizabeth and Justine in Shelley's novel, Pandora was a victim of male hubris. She was a tool to be owned, traded, and used by men.

In the novel, Elizabeth, like all 18th century women, is shown to be chained to the domestic sphere while all the men around her are free to engage in public life. She is Victor Frankenstein's fiancée, not by personal choice, but instead is gifted like an object to Victor. Elizabeth seems to have no choice or opinion on the matter of her arranged marriage and Victor himself describes the engagement as a business transaction, "It was understood that my union with Elizabeth should take place immediately upon my return." Later in the story, on her wedding night, Elizabeth is mercilessly slain by the monster for the sole purpose of revenge against Victor. She was treated not as a fully formed and feeling human, but as Victor's property to be taken and destroyed in retaliation for a transgression.

Justine's fate further highlights the gross power imbalance in 18th century society. After the monster murders Victor's younger brother, he comes across Justine, a servant in the Frankenstein household, sleeping in a barn. He slips a necklace into her pocket, framing her for young William's death, for the sole crime of being a woman who will never smile at the creature. Thus, she becomes another unwitting victim of male revenge. During her murder trial, despite their desperate pleas, both Elizabeth and Justine are powerless to stop Justine's execution.

Women at that time were not allowed to testify in court, even in their own defense. Victor alone could exonerate her, yet he does nothing.

When the creature finally confronts his creator, he demands Victor provide him with companionship. Not just any companionship; he wants Victor to create a woman and gift her to him as a possession. As Elizabeth was gifted

to Victor and as Pandora was gifted to Epimetheus. At first, Victor complies with the creature's request. He creates a woman as monstrous as his original creation. But before imbuing her with life, he instead destroys his female creation.

Ripping her limb from limb, overcome with the fear that this female creation would bring yet more sorrow and suffering into the world. He imagines a Pandora's box in her hands as she unleashes unspeakable evil on mankind. And what is the catalyst for this fear? The thought that his female creation would not submit to being possessed but instead have a mind of her own. Such was the fear that 18th century men had of female empowerment and independence.