

Frankenstein: a novel with a red thread of feminism

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Literature is an amalgamation of historical and social context alongside the writer's personal feelings. This is why a sole interpretation of 'Frankenstein' is so difficult to come up with. Shelley came from a radical background of two vocally feminist parents but whose father did not support her right to an education. Shelley in this way symbolises the creature. A symbol of the new order wrecking the institutions of the old. A well educated person who according to the time did not deserve such knowledge breaking down patriarchal literary barriers to write the greatest horror and gothic novel of the time. But Shelley always asserted she was never a 'radical'. The politics of one's mother, like their sins, are not carried by the daughter. So is her novel a feminist one? Can it be interpreted in other ways? 'Frankenstein' is arguably a feminist novel. Not only is female strength shown to be suppressed, it is said to be greater than that of a male's.

Victor said 'the wretch' saw him 'destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended on for happiness'. The verb 'depended' is synonymous with 'reliance' and 'need' and suggests the creature could not have survived without a female. This alludes to the reproductive power females carry within them. Without them, the human race would cease to exist and men, despite their supposed superiority, would not be around. The adjective 'future' is also foreboding. If we apply the same logic and assume the creature represents all men, then it clearly implies that men have no 'future' without men. Therefore, by suppressing them, men are robbing themselves and harming their own existences too. The abstract noun 'happiness' and the idea that men supply it to women goes against an age old church doctrine (an institution waning in power at the time but still

wielding a great deal of it). This is the idea that Eve, and in essence all women, are responsible for the suffering in this world as they were responsible for original sin. This was also first said in the Greek classical myth of Pandora's box where a woman is responsible for unleashing all evil on the world. But no one ever remembers Pandora also released hope. That line refers to the hope women bring.

Moreover, Victor states his reason for destroying the female creature is that 'she might become ten times more malignant than her mate'. The subjunctive tense created by the adverb 'might' shows the fear that lay in the minds of conservative men about giving women power in Shelley's era. They did not know quite what possibilities would arise. These many options which could arise and the fear they struck in men's hearts are encapsulated by the adverb 'might'. Victor also adds that the female creation may 'become a thinking and reasoning animal' and one which 'might refuse to comply'. The noun 'animal' is a metaphor of how women were perceived at the time, as lesser than men. The verbs 'thinking' and 'reasoning' are ones which connote ideas of intelligence and sophistication. The idea that Victor is afraid that a woman can think and reason shows how regressive the times Shelley wrote in were. The fact that a woman could do what a man could, in fact what a human could, terrified them. This was why Shelley and women were denied their right to an education. The aftermath would have been deadly. The latter quote shows that if women were given sovereignty over themselves, as the verbs 'refuse' and 'comply' suggest when placed together, they would no longer adhere to the same old hierarchy.

Anne K. Mellor argues the same in her essay 'Possessing Nature'. She says that men must oppress women as they are terrified of what they are capable of. They will rise up and take their rightful places on the top. However, the novel clearly has some aspects of it which are the anti-thesis to feminine values. Female characters are presented as weak and in need of male protection. This is particularly evident in how Victor describes the interaction between his father and mother. He says that 'he came like a protecting spirit to the poor girl'. The epithet 'poor' is used for nearly women in society at that time. It showed their feebleness and their lack of an ability to survive and thrive without subservience to male superiority and guidance. The simile in comparing his father to a 'protecting spirit' gives him the image of a guardian angel; a supernatural entity whose sole purpose was to keep her from her impending doom. This could apply to all society at the time as men were seen as protective figures who needed to keep a heavy hand over women when ruling them. Victor goes on to add that 'he strove to shelter her'. The verb 'shelter' gives the impression that Victor's mother was a wounded animal in desperate need of care. The verb 'strove' suggests some sort of duty to do so. It was a man's role to protect women.

This reinforces the idea that men are secondary to women, an idea which permeated even the most revolutionary societies. Take France during their civil war. This was a war that Shelley's Romantic husband and friends supported. The revolutionary new assembly they formed drafted a mock constitution to finally give the lower classes their rights. It was labelled as 'declaration of the rights of man'. The noun 'man' there should be emphasised. Their approach was to give men the rights they deserved and

deal with the issue of women later...maybe. It was never clear. One thing which was is the idea that the needs of men overrule the needs of the fairer sex. The novel clearly reflects this tone and it cannot be said to be a feminist novel when it openly displays female subservience. One might argue that the dichotomy created by the two above arguments are simple and naive. Like all other issues, this too was complicated and multifaceted.

This can be observed through the lens of another female character in the story. Safie is a character with complicated feelings and a complicated background. She is initially described as strong and fiercely minded. The creature says she had an 'independence of spirit, forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet'. The noun 'independence' is not one generally associated to women at the time. It shows that they did have it within them to be free and strong and not be in need of male assistance. The noun 'female' there is also significant as it shows the creature is aware that there is a clear gender imbalance. Male Muslims enjoy rights which the females do not. The fact that they are described as 'followers' shows that they are in worship and in thrall to a man. It is interesting how Shelley uses Islam out of all the Judeo-Abrahamic religions to criticise gender imbalances. Islam barely existed in her England. It could be to sweeten the bitter pill the religious Christian readers of the time would have to swallow. Both religions in their most orthodox form treat women terribly. By pointing out the flaws within Islam, it shows that the Christian men of England are barely better, but things could be worse for women. Safie also does something that is religiously and culturally deadly. She disobeys her father which is not something often done in a patriarchy. This is why Safie could be said to be

an emblem of the feminism in the novel. However, she is not exactly someone feminists would always rally by. Upon seeing the creature it is written that she 'rushed out of the cottage'. The verb 'rushed' shows just how scared she was and how quickly she fled the scene. The fact that she was powerless to stop the creature and lets Felix deal with the danger reinforces that age old stereotype that women need the bravery and brawns of a strong man to protect them. Without a man, they would not survive. It also places her into the category of the archetypal 'damsel in distress', a common Gothic trope. This fits in line with other Gothic novels of the time such as 'The Mysteries Of Udolpho' and Poe's short story 'The Portrait'. All of them portray women as weak and incapable of protecting themselves.

This would mean that Frankenstein is not a feminist novel. It is another tune played by the same old broken record. However, it could be argued that what this does is highlight the inequality and injustice which exists in society. It does it in the only way that would be feasible to be published. It is the only way to get the message out there. Shelley herself says she is not a 'radical' but she does sympathize and empathize with the plight of women. In this way, Shelley differs from the violent revolutionary Romantics who surrounded her. Her calm level headed portrayal of suffering makes her akin to a modern sociologist. Frankenstein should not be taken as a manifesto for change and upheaval. It should be looked at as a social commentary of the time. In summation, I believe there is no clear cut answer. The novel appears to have some feminist aspects to it with female power and equality being recognized, but like the time the De Lacey spend in the novel, it is short. Mellor also agrees that the portrayal of the De Lacey family shows that

equality could be possible in the society, but the creature, representative of men, destroys it. Female power is presented as great but also as 'malevolent' and reinforces age old biblical dogma. Feminism in the novel is not as dichotomous as one would expect. Aspects of it are shown and then quickly removed. This is why I believe the best argument to make would be that Frankenstein should be taken as a bland social commentary and not as a call to revolution.