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How the Creature became a Monster:

A Feminist Reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Frida Hallberg

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Supervisor: Cian Duffy

Abstract

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley was written in the beginning of the 19th century and became in the 20th century one of the most investigated novel within the feminist literary critic. I have investigated *Frankenstein* from a feminist angle, especially French feminist literature theory, to explore what it is that causes the monstrous elements of the story. I argue that the monstrosity of the novel is above all a lack of engagement with female values, which here are identified the domestic, care-taking and relationships. Thereby, the novel also in a subtle way criticizes 19th century ideals of gender and its rigid division between male and female occupations. The ideal in *Frankenstein* is presented as having a balance between values represented as masculine and feminine. The feminine domestic sphere plays an important part in this balancing as it entails cooperation, shared experience and mutual decisions.

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Introduction

This thesis investigates Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* from a feminist perspective, with particular emphasis on the representation of the monstrous. The dominance of a male discourse in *Frankenstein* is striking and I will argue that the monstrosity in the novel is due to a lack of values traditionally represented as feminine, notably the prioritization of social and domestic relationships. By exposing the catastrophic consequences of an existence without such values, I will argue that Mary Shelley's novel condemns patriarchal society and criticizes early nineteenth-century gender norms which prescribed separate spheres for the sexes and neglected the education of women. Shelley emphasizes the importance of domestic relationships and throughout her novel, it is the female rather than the male voice which speaks for those relationships.

The historical circumstances in which *Frankenstein* was written are an important factor for the understanding of the novel. A debate about equality between the sexes had been raised by Mary Shelley's mother Mary Wollstonecraft, who was influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution. Wollstonecraft was a pioneer feminist and a radical novelist whose work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) called for immediate change for the situation of women, and especially claimed their right to the same education as men. *Frankenstein* was published anonymously in 1818, and "[p]resumably because it was unthinkable that a woman should refuse to moralize, most critics assumed that the author of *Frankenstein* was a man" (Poovey 122). The novel was revised and published again in 1831, and in this edition Mary Shelley stepped forward as the author. In her author's introduction gives her account of how she, "then a young girl, came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea" (Shelley 165): In 1816, Mary Shelley was 18 years old, and accompanied by Percy Bysshe Shelley (later her husband), Lord Byron and her stepsister Claire Clairmont, spent a summer in the Swiss Alps. These four young people challenged each other to come up with ghost stories, and during a sleepless night, Mary had a vision of what later would become her timeless story about the young science student who creates a living being from scratch, and then as soon as the creature comes to life abandons it and leaves it to its own destiny. Working in the era of Romanticism, a period often thought of as dominated by "the canonical Big Six - Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats" (Cantor 708

quoted in Linkin 548), Mary Shelley's novel was undoubtedly influenced not only by the work of her parents (Wollstonecraft, and the radical philosopher William Godwin), but also by her experience as a woman at a time when women's position in society was comparatively marginalized.

The novel has consequently been subject to a myriad of feminist critiques in the 20th century, and as Diane Hoeveler concludes when discussing the major feminist literary interpretations of the novel, "*Frankenstein* has figured more importantly in the development of feminist literary theory than perhaps any other novel" (45). The French feminist literary theory, developed in the 1970s by among others Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, is for this essay a particularly valuable approach to analyse *Frankenstein*. This theory assumes a psychoanalytical perspective on language where the normative discourse is seen as patriarchal and language based on the male as the subject, while women are reduced to being objects or seen as the "other". A feminine discourse, according to this theory, needs to break with male conventions and develop a new type of linguistic situation. This is what the French critics came to call *l'écriture féminine*, normally translated as women's writing. As Hoeveler describes it, "women can rebel either through the strategic use of silence or by using *l'écriture féminine*" (45).

The creature which Frankenstein creates is in popular terms referred to as 'Frankenstein's monster', but a reading of the novel shows that the being is clearly not born a monster - he becomes a monster due to external experiences. This is why I want to examine what it is that is monstrous in *Frankenstein*: What causes the monstrosity? I will argue that it is above all a lack of those values and relationships stereotypically understood as feminine which makes the creature become a monster and which drives the disastrous course of the plot. This absence of feminine values can be seen both symbolically and literally in *Frankenstein*: symbolically through the use of stylistic devices and literally through the marginalization of female characters. I will examine how Mary Shelley has written in order to achieve this deficiency of feminine values, both by using *écriture féminine* and the strategic use of silence. By taking the lack of feminine values to the extreme and showing its catastrophic consequences I also want to argue that Mary Shelley condemns 19th-century gender norms which valued the male above the female, in a society which Poovey describes as follows: "Not only was the fundamental bourgeois personality male [...], the organizational

principles of bourgeois society were unabashedly made by men for men” (ix). What Shelley seems to be advocating is instead something which Mellor argues is missing from the Romantic literary canon - the “shared rather than solitary experience” (*Romanticism and Feminism* 8). This is an ideology which could be derived from Mary Shelley’s mother Mary Wollstonecraft - she argued for equality between the sexes and the importance of their interaction in society rather than separation.

I will begin with a background chapter to establish some fundamental context: Mary Wollstonecraft and her work *A Vindication on the rights of Woman*, as well as women’s situation in England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. I will also give some account of previous readings of *Frankenstein*, especially those dealing with *écriture féminine* and female silence. I then go on to examine how gender roles are constructed in *Frankenstein*. After this, I examine the extent to which *Frankenstein* employs *écriture féminine* and female silence strategically and what these concepts add to our understanding of the novel. The third part will examine the ideology of shared experience and how this is constructed in *Frankenstein*. To conclude I will see how Mary Shelley’s writing works to infuse feminine ideals in a male dominated novel - and how this infusion functions as a critique of society.

The analysis of the novel will focus on some specific aspects of the story, which exemplify a division between the sexes, as well as distinguish masculine versus feminine values. Firstly, there is the frame narrative in which the explorer Robert Walton corresponds with his sister Margaret Saville (who is tied to a domestic sphere in England). In his letters tells the story of how he meets Victor Frankenstein during an expedition in the Arctic. Secondly, there is Victor Frankenstein’s project, which he pursues in the public sphere of university: He experiments with giving life to lifeless material, resulting in the birth of the creature. And finally, there is the creature’s ‘education’, which he receives while hiding in a hovel outside the cottage of a family named the De Laceys. His education is both an understanding of human nature through the observations of the family’s domestic life, as well as an academic education which he picks up through Felix’s (the family’s older son) education of the Arabian girl Safie.

Background

When examining *Frankenstein* it is useful to establish who Mary Shelley was and in what context she wrote the novel - her private life and people surrounding her have been much discussed in relation to *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley's parents were two radical thinkers and novelists living and working at the time of the French revolution: Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Wollstonecraft, however, did not survive her daughter's birth (Poovey xvi), something many critics have argued affected Mary Shelley's own writing.

Although it took place in France, the French Revolution marked an important turning point for English society as well. Poovey suggests that "it provoked both explicit challenges to the political inequality inherent in English patriarchal society and adamant defenses of the whole system" (xv). Wollstonecraft and Godwin were indeed among those who challenged traditional society, and whose ideologies were influenced by the French revolution and its ideas of freedom and equality. Godwin, who was a social philosopher, advocated personal freedom and the rejection of government, and his ideas have influenced anarchistic as well as communist doctrines ("William Godwin"). Wollstonecraft, who was more concerned with women's situation than Godwin, "argued that the French revolutionary principles of liberty and equality applied to women as much as to men" ("Wollstonecraft, Mary"), and her ideology called for immediate political action concerning the situation of women.

When *Frankenstein* was published in 1818, it was done anonymously. Mainly due to its controversial political message, with traces from both Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's ideologies, most critics assumed that the writer was a man, "[p]resumably because it was unthinkable that a woman should refuse to moralize" (Poovey 122). It was not until 1831 that Mary Shelley presented herself as the author, and this edition of the text was revised, and erased some of its most provocative ideologies. In the 1831 edition, Mellor claims for example that, "the ideology of the egalitarian and loving bourgeois family that Mary Shelley had inherited from her mother's writing [...] is now undercut" ("Choosing a Text" 210). The 1818 edition also presents Victor Frankenstein as more morally responsible for his own actions than in the later edition, in which the events are more a result of an "indifferent destiny or faith" (Mellor, "Choosing a Text" 209), something Mellor argues was a result of Shelley's own shifting approach to faith. Mellor argues that the text to prefer when teaching

and studying *Frankenstein* is the 1818 edition, since this text is closest to Shelley's original intentions. This essay is therefore based on the 1818 edition of the text.

Wollstonecraft's ideas are of great importance in this essay, and especially her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as Mary Shelley undoubtedly had read this work which influenced her writing directly. Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (hereafter referred to as *A Vindication*) in 1792 – and this work is today seen as “one of the trailblazing works of feminism” (“Mary Wollstonecraft”). It is a crucial work in relation to *Frankenstein*, since it both establishes a picture of women's situation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and propagates for an ideology of equality between the sexes which we could find in Shelley's novel. In this treatise, Wollstonecraft discusses women's place in society and observes that “either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial” (*A Vindication* 1). The discussion of femininity as a construct, as a result of nurture rather than nature, is the essence of Wollstonecraft's treatise. She criticises the fact that the exclusion of women from the public sphere renders them the weaker sex, and claims that “[t]he minds of women are enfeebled by false refinement” (*A Vindication* 2). This “false refinement”, Wollstonecraft argues, is the consequence of women's education which differs from men's in being less profound and more shallow and fragmented, which causes women to become superficial and ignorant:

One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than rational wives; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect (*A Vindication* 2).

Wollstonecraft furthermore argues that an immediate amelioration of women's education, making it equal to that of men's, would benefit the whole of society since women's state of ignorance is unsuitable to raising children, and that women could - with the right education - become useful members of society. The separation of spheres, in which men dominated the

public spheres of law, education and science, and women were tied to the domestic sphere through their status as mothers and wives, is condemned by Wollstonecraft. She argues that women and men should be educated together in public schools, to learn to develop mutual affection and relationships based on equality. Thereby she criticizes both homeschooling and private boarding schools for boys only:

At school boys become gluttons and slovens, and, instead of cultivating domestic affections, very early rush into the libertinism which destroys the constitution before it is formed; hardening the heart as it weakens the understanding. [...] I principally wish to enforce the necessity of educating the sexes together to perfect both, and of making children sleep at home that they may learn to love home; yet to make private support, instead of smothering, public affections, they should be sent to school to mix with a number of equals, for only by the jostlings of equality can we form a just opinion of ourselves (*A Vindication* 364-365)

Society's expectations of women and their position as inferior to men is also an important factor for understanding *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley lived and worked in the era of Romanticism, in which the trends within art and literature, according to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "emphasized the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental" ("Romanticism"). Writers who could be said to embody these ideals and who traditionally have been seen as the core canon of Romantic literature, known as "The Big Six", are all male - including among others William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley (Mary Shelley's husband), and Lord Byron (Cantor 708 quoted in Linkin 548). However, as Meena claims, "[f]or women writers, this Romantic ideal of selfhood and its visionary freedom was not easy to come by" (5). Women had experiences different from men and as Mellor reports, an Anglo-American tradition of feminist criticism assumes that "[women's] perception[s] of the world are shaped by the differential sex-roles that Western societies have historically enforced upon women and men" (*Romanticism and Feminism* 3). Feminine ideals were connected to the domestic sphere and enforced by among other things conduct manuals. Wollstonecraft strongly criticized conduct manuals as she argued that women were "ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavour by satire or instruction to improve them" (*A Vindication* 8). By the end of the 18th century, one of these conduct manuals described

female propriety as containing “a remarkable tendency to conform to the wishes and example of those for whom they feel a warmth of regard” (Thomas Gisborne quoted in Poovey, 3). The female role as connected to care-taking is also described by Alexander: “They cared for the young, watched over the sick and dying, supported other women in childbirth” (3). Mellor calls this ideal a “patriarchal ideal of female self-sacrifice” (221). The subjective and individual world-view which today is connected to the Romantic canon of literature is not consistent with domestic experiences, and as Alexander furthermore claims, “[b]rought up with a very different sense of the self, with constant reminders of how their lives were meshed in with other lives in bonds of care and concern, women could not easily aspire to this ideal” (5-6). Women were expected to form and prioritize relationships and to care for others, and this is also one of the most important aspects in which women were said to differ from men. The relationship bonding quality could be connected to something Mellor argues is lacking in the Romantic literary canon - the “shared rather than solitary experience” (8). In the experience of being a woman it is therefore to assume that Mary Shelley wrote differently from contemporary male writers of her time.

There is as previously mentioned an existing critical debate about *Frankenstein* as a feminist text. The major feminist interpretations of *Frankenstein* are summarized by Diane Hoeveler in her essay “*Frankenstein, Feminism, and Literary Theory*”, in which she calls the novel “the “mother-lode” of feminist criticism” (60). Hoeveler distinguishes three major traditions of feminist schools which all have participated in the critical debate about *Frankenstein*: the American, the British and the French. I will focus especially on the American and the French, as these approaches marks a clearer distinction between the constructed ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, and my argument is based on this distinction.

The American school of feminist literary criticism, which, according to Hoeveler “understands ‘women's experiences’ to be the basis of the differences in women's writings” (45) will be an important standpoint in the discussion of this essay. As mentioned earlier, I will argue that Mary Shelley’s experiences of being a woman was an importance influence on her writing - but her literary and political family was also important. One important critic in this area is Mary Poovey, whose book *The Proper Lady and the Women Writer* studies female writers at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century - among these Mary Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft - and their complicated relationship to

the social expectations of female propriety. Shelley, Poovey argues, faced an especially challenging collision between “the ‘Romantic’ model of originality and the ‘Victorian’ model of feminine domesticity” (116), and her personality “is a remarkable combination of stereotypical feminine reticence and unconventional self-assertion” (115). While her dead mother’s works were “outspokenly critical” (Poovey xvii), symbolized “courage and independence” (Poovey xvi), and were “always at odds with the ideal of feminine propriety” (Poovey xvi), Mary Shelley’s works are more “ostentatiously self-effacing” (Poovey xvii) than her mother’s. I want to argue that like Poovey suggests, Shelley is less outspoken than Wollstonecraft, and puts forward her ideology in a more indirect manner. Ellen Moers is another critic who has based her analysis on female experiences, and in her work *Literary Women* she characterises *Frankenstein* as a “birth myth”, which “evolved out of Shelley’s own tragic experience as a young, unwed mother of a baby who would live only a few weeks” (Hoeveler 46), as well as “her own guilt both for having caused her mother’s death, and for having failed to produce a healthy son and heir for Percy [Bysshe Shelley]” (Hoeveler 46). The birth myth aspect is something to which I will return later.

The French school of feminist criticism, Hoeveler reports, is more focused on language and the idea that “the masculine-dominated system of language produces meaning that tend to objectify or erase women’s voices” (45). In such a linguistic situation, Hoeveler explains, “women can rebel either through the strategic use of silence or by using *l’écriture féminine*” (45). *Écriture féminine* and the idea of a female language tend to be difficult to define - as Hélène Cixous describes it in “The Laugh of the Medusa”:

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing [...] It will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric [male-dominated] writing system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate (883).

Taking this as an attempt to describe female writing, this essay will also see silence as something that breaks from a conventional discourse tradition, and thereby could be used as a powerful tool for a feminine discourse. *Écriture féminine* is also identified as “the pleasures

(jouissance) of living in and writing out of a female body in harmony with the voice and body of the mother” (Hoeveler 46). The French criticism has therefore influenced especially the discussion of bodily issues in *Frankenstein*. Among the French critics, Hoeveler mentions Julia Kristeva, whose notions of symbolic and semiotic language is an aspect of *écriture féminine* - where the symbolic could be seen as representing the traditional male writing. The symbolic language is according to Kristeva “associated with authority, order, fathers, repression and control” (Barry, 123) while the semiotic language “is characterized not by logic and order, but by ‘displacement, slippage, condensation’” (Barry, 123). *Frankenstein* could furthermore be said to have adopted a “double-voiced discourse”, a concept developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, which allows us to see more than the dominant discourse in a novel, and expose so called “muted discourses” (Allen, 160). Muted discourses are connected to everything which deviates from the convention, so if we, like the French feminist critics, assume that the conventional language is phallogentric and symbolic, the ‘other’ discourse could be seen female and semiotic. Although *écriture féminine* postdates Shelley’s novel by almost 150 years, this essay will nevertheless investigate the extent to which Shelley’s narrative could be said to anticipate such ideas. I will argue that both the strategic use of silence, and the undermining of symbolic language, can be found in *Frankenstein*.

Another feminist study of *Frankenstein* which contributes to the discussion in this essay is Cynthia Pon’s “‘Passages in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*: Towards a Feminist Figure of Humanity?”. In this essay, Pon argues that *Frankenstein* through unravelling a discourse of masculine humanity opens way for a “new figure of humanity” - a feminist figure of humanity. The discourse of the feminist figure is, unlike the masculine discourse, a discourse of suffering. The feminist figure must “resist representation, resist literal figuration, and still erupt in powerful new tropes” (Harraway, as cited in Pon 43). Like Pon, I will argue that the discourse of suffering in *Frankenstein* can be found in female characters, and in the creature himself, whose gender is ambiguous.

Gender in *Frankenstein*

As already established, Mary Wollstonecraft openly and radically criticized the stereotypical idea of femininity, which she argued was a result of nurture and not of nature. Interestingly enough however, the female characters in *Frankenstein* conform to rather than rebel against

this stereotypical view of women. Thereby, the construction of femininity and feminine themes in the novel involves to a great extent the representation of what has been established as traditional feminine values - domesticity, care-taking and relationships. The separate spheres between the sexes are also highly distinguished in *Frankenstein* and according to Mellor, "Viktor Frankenstein's nineteenth-century Genevan society is founded on rigid division of sex roles: the male inhabits the public sphere, the female is relegated to the private or domestic sphere" (220). She argues that *Frankenstein* "specifically portrays the consequences of a social construction of gender that values the male above the female" (220). So although the genders in *Frankenstein* to a great extent are constructed as binary oppositions, corresponding to society's expectations of male and female, it could be argued that Mary Shelley uses this opposition in order to point out its consequences - while at the same time being less "outspokenly critical" of these consequences (Poovey, xvii) than her mother.

In the frame story, in which Robert Walton corresponds with his sister, the gender roles are clearly distinguished: Walton is the solitary explorer and his sister Margaret Saville is the mother and wife who stays at home in England. Walton's narrative could be seen as representing what Pon calls a "theme of the masculine quest" (35), and the frame narrative discourse is indeed masculine – all letters are addressed from Walton to his sister and never the other way around. This places Margaret not only in a domestic and silent position, but also in a position of anxiety in which she does not know whether her brother will survive the voyage or not. Walton complains about the fact that he lacks people close to him: "I have no friend, Margaret: when I am glowing with the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate my joy; if I am assailed by disappointment, no one will endeavour to sustain me in dejection" (*Frankenstein* 10). This highlights Walton's solitary experience, and his incapability of forming bonds with those who are not of his own class, gender and race: "I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve or amend my plans" (*Frankenstein* 10). As Pon argues, "[t]he qualities that Walton lists as criteria for friendship [...] are keywords of an established, privileged order" (35). Although the relationship between sister and brother is affectionate, Walton seems incapable of counting Margaret as a friend. He can not share his experiences with his sister as an equal - she is not educated in the same way and

her experiences are limited to the domestic. This difference is emphasized when Walton tries to describe to Margaret what he is experiencing, experiences he cannot share with her except through letters: “I feel a cold northern breeze play upon my cheeks, which braces my nerves, and fills me with delight. Do you understand this feeling?” (*Frankenstein* 7). Finally, Walton finds in Frankenstein the equal he has wanted: he writes to Margaret that “I begin to love him as a brother” (*Frankenstein* 10). The word brother is significant here, since it seems to point towards another type of relationship than that with his sister – a relationship based on equality, with a sameness of sex and experiences. Mellor argues that “we might observe that Victor Frankenstein’s most passionate relationships are with men rather than with women” (225), and also that “Walton responds to Frankenstein with an ardor that borders on the homoerotic” (225). This response contributes to the masculine discourse pervading the whole novel.

The binary construction of gender is also highly visible in the case of Victor Frankenstein and his family. While Victor, like Walton, in many ways corresponds to the role of the Romantic male subject, the female members of the Frankenstein household correspond to the ideal of female self-sacrifice and propriety: Victor’s mother dies of an infection caught from the family’s adopted daughter Elizabeth, because she cannot refrain herself from seeing her during her sickness. Elizabeth takes great pain to render the rest of the household happy after the death of the mother, and Victor says of her that “I never beheld her so enchanting as at this time, when she was continually endeavouring to contribute to the happiness of others, entirely forgetful of herself” (*Frankenstein* 26). Both of these examples highlights self-sacrificing qualities. Victor and Elizabeth have during childhood been educated together in Victor’s childhood home, just like Wollstonecraft argued that men and women ought to be educated together. At the age of 17 however, Victor left his domestic life to join the public sphere at university - which in the beginning of the 19th century was reserved for men. At university, he becomes occupied in natural philosophy, and begins to experiment with his ability to create life. As he begins to neglect his family at university, Victor’s discourse, like Walton’s, becomes self-absorbed and like Walton, he participates in the “theme of the masculine quest” (Pon 35). His experiment, in which he has no regards for consequences, and especially not the pain he will inflict on the creature, has a disastrous outcome which literally annihilates his domestic circle.

In the case of the creature, gender is a more complex issue. The creature is referred to by Victor as a man - a 'he'. As he is borne a *tabula rasa*, the creature is not aware of his gender however, and in the beginning of his lifetime he shows qualities that correspond more to feminine than to masculine ideals. The De Lacey family plays an important part in the creature's apprehension of the world and the nature of mankind as he observes them through a chink between his hovel and their cottage. To begin with, the creature picks up on the family's domestic habits, and he develops a very strong affection for his "protectors", as he calls them. He shows an ability to see their feelings as his own: "when they were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys" (*Frankenstein* 77). He also learns the value of making other people happy while sacrificing his own convenience, which indeed corresponds to the "patriarchal ideal of female self-sacrifice" (Mellor 221): "I had been accustomed, during the night, to steal a part of their store for my own consumption; but when I found that in doing this I inflicted pain on the cottagers, I abstained, and satisfied myself with berries, nuts, and roots, which I gathered from a neighbouring wood" (*Frankenstein* 77). Above all, he admires the De Lacey's relationships with each other, their domestic affection: "What chiefly struck me was the gentle manners of these people; and I longed to join them, but dared not" (*Frankenstein* 76). Although the creature has come to the conclusion that people recoil from him because of his monstrous appearance, he is at this part of his narration driven by love of the De Lacey family, and his uttermost aspiration is to join their domesticity. This is something he understands will be difficult but not impossible: "I imagined that they would be disgusted, until, by my gentle demeanour and conciliating words, I should first win their favour, and afterwards their love" (*Frankenstein* 79). According to the creature, he "did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity" (*Frankenstein* 79)

Education, as we can conclude from Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication*, was more accessible for men, so education could be seen as a male domain in *Frankenstein*, contrasting to the domestic theme. The creature's academic education thus introduces masculine values to the creature's life. Volney's *Ruins of Empires* - a reflection on the political significance of the rise and fall of civilisations - is one of the texts with these types of values. The history lessons make the creature utterly confused, since until then he has known only about domestic values and affectionate relationships:

Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle, and at another as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike. To be a great and virtuous man appeared the highest honour that can befall a sensitive being; to be base and vicious, as many on record have been, appeared the lowest degradation. [...] For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow, or even why there were laws and governments; but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased, and I turned away with disgust and loathing (*Frankenstein* 83)

The creature wants to join the De Lacey family in their domesticity, but he painfully realizes how hideous and deformed he is when he tries to make contact with the family: “Who can describe their horror and consternation on beholding me? Agatha fainted; and Safie, unable to attend to her friend, rushed out of the cottage” (*Frankenstein* 94). After this event, the creature begins to be driven by hatred for his creator, instead of love for the De Lacays: “from that moment I declared everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against him who had formed me, and sent me forth to this insupportable misery” (*Frankenstein* 95). Of his education, he says that “thanks to the lessons of Felix, and the sanguinary laws of man, I have learned how to work mischief” (*Frankenstein* 101). Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, another text in the creature’s education, provides him with the concepts of good and evil, and he begins to identify himself with Satan: “Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me”. (*Frankenstein* 90). The masculine values picked up from his education thus mark a shift in the creature’s response to the world, in contrast to the feminine and domestic values he has learned from the family’s everyday life. In the end of the novel, the creature has inflicted pain upon and murdered Frankenstein’s friends and family. But as we can conclude from the creature’s narrative, it is his situation as an abandoned and deformed being with no chance of forming relationships, that urges these monstrous qualities. Through education he becomes aware of human atrocities and destruction, and also his ability to “work mischief” (*Frankenstein* 101) upon the person who gave him life. Hence it is clear that the creature’s monstrosity is a result of nurture and not nature, just as Wollstonecraft had argued that femininity was a result of nurture.

So as most characters in the novel conform to stereotypical ideals about femininity and masculinity, these ideals also become fatal, as the division of the sexes becomes disastrous. Roles presented as either solely masculine or feminine are shown to be destructive: Walton's self-fulfilling voyage of exploration is nearly fatal to him and his crew, while Margaret's domestic position forces her to be passively prepared for the worst in the case of her brother's death. Victor's time at university, in which he is separated from his domestic childhood, turns out disastrous as his progeny begins to haunt him and murder his family circle. Victor's mother's self-sacrifice results in her death. After having been denied all types of domestic relations, the creature develops monstrous plans of revenge towards his creator, plans that seem to have sprung from his education and understanding of evil in the world, as well as from the unfairness of his position on the earth as an abandoned and deformed being.

Écriture Féminine* and the Strategic Use of Silence in *Frankenstein

As we can conclude from the previous section, female voices in *Frankenstein* are generally reduced to the "other": they are hardly given any space in the novel and female characters are conventionally tied to oppressed states as mothers and domestic keepers, while the dominant discourse is male-centered - narrated by Walton, Frankenstein and the creature. This, however, is why the notion of double-voiced discourse is useful, as well as the concepts of *écriture féminine* and the strategic use of silence. I want to argue that these concepts function to bring forward the unrepresented female.

To begin with, the frame narrative provides an example of double voiced discourse and the strategic use of silence. As established, all letters are from brother to sister, making the female voice completely silent. Since silence however could be seen as a powerful tool for a female discourse, this silence might very well be strategically used as a 'muted discourse'. Although no letter from her is presented, Margaret's opinions are in fact expressed already in the opening line of the novel, in the first letter from Robert: "You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise *which you have regarded with such evil forebodings*" (*Frankenstein* 7, my emphasis). Here, it could

be said that Margaret's voice is slipping in on Walton's symbolic discourse, on a semiotic level - if we use Kristeva's notion of the symbolic and semiotic. Margaret's warning is also justified because in the end, Walton's voyage has not achieved anything but the suffering of those onboard: as the boat becomes immured in the ice, the crew demand that Walton turns back as soon as the ice dissipates. Indeed, the whole expedition seems preposterous at the end of the novel. Walton calls his journey a "great purpose" (*Frankenstein* 9), but in the end, nothing great or noble has come out of it. Pon observes that in *Frankenstein*, "[h]eroic quest is presented almost in naked parody" (35), and the novel seems to expose the selfishness in embarking on a project like this while breaking up families and leaving sisters, mothers, and fiancées behind in a state of anxiety and suffering. Here, the employment of a strategic use of silence could be seen as functioning to bring forward this specific attitude, and the character of Margaret Saville could therefore be seen as offering a possibility for interpreting of the novel.

Furthermore, in relation to the project Victor pursues, in which he wants to create life from scratch, the employment of *écriture féminine* could also be seen as bringing forward the unrepresented female, normally necessary for biological reproduction. By being the sole creator of a living being, Frankenstein usurps the female reproductive role - his work becomes like a case of a male pregnancy. As Alexander argues, Victor's project is a "circumvention of normal sexuality and procreation" (128) in which "[t]he laboratory has taken the place of the womb" (128). Victor continuously refers to his work as 'labours' while he is working with his project: "The moon gazed on my midnight labours" (*Frankenstein* 33); "Winter, spring, and summer, passed away during my labours" (*Frankenstein* 35). Since women otherwise are the ones who go through labour in order to give birth, this is a case where female bodily issues are prominent. This resonates with one of the definitions of *écriture féminine*: "The pleasures (jouissance) of living in and writing out of a female body in harmony with the voice and body of the mother" (Hoeveler 46). The aftermath of Victor's project also resembles a post-natal depression, something Marsch describes as the "blood-curdling combination of fear and guilt, depression and anxiety which are common emotions following the birth of a baby" (226). As soon as the creature comes to life, Victor recoils from it: "I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart"

(*Frankenstein* 36). As female bodily issues are addressed in the form of this pregnancy metaphor, Mary Shelley's experience of being a woman can be said to be manifested - just as Moers argues that *Frankenstein* is a "birth myth" derived from Mary Shelley's own life. So we find an employment of a language identified as feminine, addressing female bodily issues, but within a masculine narrative. This seemingly paradoxical relation emphasises the lack of femaleness in Victor's creation.

The absence of a maternal figure also resonates in the figure of the creature, who becomes a female bodily issue, like Kristeva's definition of the 'abject'. Kristeva defines abjection as "death infecting life" (4) and "what disturbs identity, system order. What does not respect border, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Just as the maternal body itself is abjected, according to Kristeva, so is the creature's body, which indeed is a composite entity, a patch-work, which Victor stitches out of disparate dead body parts from humans and animals. It becomes a disturbing thing: "The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials, and often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation, whilst, still urged on by an eagerness which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion" (*Frankenstein* 34). According to Marie Mulvey-Roberts, whom Hoeveler mentions in her essay, the creature represents the "spectre of the maternal body as well as Frankenstein's monstrous child" (as quoted from Hoeveler 51). Kristeva explains that when a woman nears the abjection of the maternal body, "one notes that it is through the expedient of writing that she gets there" (54). The body of the creature thus becomes something French feminists identifies as *l'écriture féminine*, "the voice and body of the mother" (Hoeveler 46), which creates a feminine discourse.

A female counterpart of the creature - which Victor begins to create at the creature's request, is annihilated by Victor before he finishes it, as he envisions that "she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate" (*Frankenstein* 118). This could be seen as a misogynist and symbolical act by Victor to eradicate the female voice, just as he has circumvented the female part in reproduction, and it is thereby also a rejection of feminine values. Pon, however, also sees the destruction of this female as the female "resisting representation" (43). Pon argues that "[h]ad the female creature been completed, she would have been made according to the desire of the male creature". So on a symbolical level Victor kills the female creature in an act which Mellor sees as "an image that suggests a violent

rape” (224), as Frankenstein narrates, “trembling with passion, [I] tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged” (*Frankenstein* 119). But the non-representation of the female could thus also be seen as a strategic use of silence - the female counterpart resists representation within Frankenstein’s masculine discourse.

It could be argued that Kristeva’s notions of symbolic and semiotic language are found within the discourse of the creature and his education, because for Kristeva the acquisition of language also marks the transition from the semiotic, maternal, pre-verbal stage – which she connects to “the infant’s early closeness to its mother” – to the symbolic, patriarchal stage, which she associates with the “various discourses that organize public life [...] the totality of culture” (Jones, 58). With his education and thereby transition into the symbolic world, the creature faces the difficulty of putting himself into a symbolic order as he realizes that he belongs nowhere: “And what was I? [...] When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me” (*Frankenstein* 83). This is also when realizes that he is an outcast - a monster: “Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?” (*Frankenstein* 83). As the creature is denied what is identified with the semiotic, especially a mother figure, his transition to the symbolic becomes especially painful and confusing. Thereby, the lack of femaleness and feminine values are once again highlighted.

Shared Experience in *Frankenstein*

Genders constructed in a binary opposition, as well as the employment of a feminine discourse in a male dominated story, seems to denounce a subjective, male-centered discourse in *Frankenstein*, to give room for a female voice. But what does the female voice signify?, Conduct-book femininity was criticized by Mary Wollstonecraft who called it “false refinement” (*A Vindication* 2), and in *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley shows the dangers of a division between sexes in which the female is inferior and tied to domesticity. But while the division of spheres is negatively depicted, domesticity, is also described as something positive, on the condition that everyone in the household is involved. This creates a balance between the sexes, strong relationships, and shared rather than solitary experiences. This brings me to my third part – the ideology of shared experience. Shared experience contrasts with what Alexander calls “the romantic ideal of selfhood” (5), or what I identified in my

Background chapter as major trends within Romanticism - themes like the individual, the subjective and the irrational. This ideology could be traced back to Wollstonecraft's argument that men and women should to be educated together to be able to function in society together - something Mary Shelley seems to have taken as a starting point in *Frankenstein's* ideology about shared experience.

As the shared experience and domesticity involves more than one person, it will also imply mutual decisions, something we can find examples of in the frame narrative. Walton's voyage becomes, as previously mentioned, dangerous, as his sister's warning suggested. At the end of the novel, when Walton has listened to Victor's story about his monstrous creation, Walton seems to have learned a lesson from Victor's self-absorbing project (consciously or unconsciously). Although Victor's pursuit has been for knowledge, and Walton's is for exploration, Frankenstein's narration warns about these kinds of self-fulfilling pursuits:

A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquillity. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule were always observed; if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquillity of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Cæsar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed (*Frankenstein* 34)

Victor essentially says that domestic affections are more valuable than the pursuit for knowledge, a lesson he himself learned too late. Walton, after demands from the other sailors on his ship, decides to turn back to England with his purpose unfulfilled: "The die is cast; I have consented to return, if we are not destroyed. Thus are my hopes blasted by cowardice and indecision; I come back ignorant and disappointed" (*Frankenstein* 155). So although Walton wants to continue, the turning back becomes a mutual decision - Walton does not want to continue without the support of his crew, and they want to return home. Walton's narration is of disappointment, but through the character of Margaret, the underlying

ideology seems to be that it is a good thing that they turn back, as her warning suggested already in the opening line of the novel.

The shared experience is also something Victor describes as he recalls his past and his domestic life in Geneva, which represents his happiest times, in stark contrast to his subsequent misery. In his domestic circle he includes his brothers, his adopted sister Elizabeth, his parents and his friend Henry Clerval, of whom he says that “[n]either of us possessed the slightest pre-eminence over the other; the voice of command was never heard amongst us; but mutual affection engaged us all to comply with and obey the slightest desire of each other” (*Frankenstein* 25). Although Wollstonecraft criticized homeschooling, the education Victor received at home together with Elizabeth corresponds to her idea that men and women should be educated together to learn from each other - a shared experience. In the Frankenstein family, separation marks the beginning of their misfortunes - as Victor leaves for university. Unlike the education he receives at home, of which he says that “our studies were never forced” (*Frankenstein* 21), his solitary time at university is described as a ferocious pursuit for knowledge, and in terms of confinement: “I appeared rather like one doomed by slavery to toil in the mines, or any other unwholesome trade, than an artist occupied by his favourite employment” (*Frankenstein* 35). Just as Walton’s expedition ends up futile, the end of Viktor’s project is described as ultimately unfulfilling: “[n]ow that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished” (*Frankenstein* 36). The cost of this has also been terrible: Victor has sacrificed his family which has been described as the source of happiness and fulfillment in his life. Mary Shelley thereby exposes the dangers of living a life in solitude, cut away from domestic relationships. Poovey suggests that “*Frankenstein* calls into question, not the social conventions that inhibit creativity, but rather the egotism that Mary Shelley associates with the artist’s monstrous self-assertion” (122).

In contrast to the Frankensteins, whose separation marks the beginning of their misfortune, stands the De Lacey family. This family, Mellor claims, “constitutes Mary Shelley’s ideal, an ideal derived from her mother’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*” (224). In exile, the family has been forced to leave an opulent lifestyle in Paris to live together in poverty. The result is, however, that the family, albeit poor, are happy in their domesticity, and “their joys, depending on each other, were not interrupted by the casualties that took place around them” (*Frankenstein* 92). Mellor observes that in this household, “all

work is shared equally in an atmosphere of rational companionship, mutual concern, and love” (222).

Shared experience is also precisely what Frankenstein’s creature desperately searches for but fails to achieve every time, because people recoil from him and his monstrous appearance. To begin with, the creature lacks natural domestic relations since he has no mother and his father has abandoned him - he is utterly alone. His first hope of shared experience is with the De Lacey family, but their reaction to his entering the cottage is one of terror. When the creature later sees a child, he hopes that the child might react differently from the others: “An idea seized me, that this little creature was unprejudiced, and had lived too short a time to have imbibed a horror of deformity” (*Frankenstein* 100) This attempt however also fails - the child too assumes him to be malevolent: “monster! ugly wretch! you wish to eat me, and tear me to pieces” (*Frankenstein* 100). The creature’s last hope of shared experience is a female counterpart of himself, “as deformed and horrible”, which he compels Frankenstein to create. When Frankenstein later decides to annihilate this female, the creature’s last hope of shared experience is neglected. For every refusal of shared experience, the creature gets more and more dejected, and through this he develops his monstrous revenge on Frankenstein.

By progressively annihilating feminine values, Mary Shelley advocates the need for shared experience and domestic relationships, which, as I have argued, are traditionally represented as feminine values. Shelley shows that solely masculine or solely feminine pursuits within separate spheres is a phenomenon that could become dangerous and cause suffering. Solely masculine pursuits, like the case of Victor’s creation and Walton’s exploration, turn out dangerous. Solely feminine pursuits, cut away from the public sphere, causes suffering. This is the case of Margaret Saville who is in a position of anxiety in waiting for her brother to return to England, as well as the self-sacrificing female members in the Frankenstein household. All of these female characters are tied to the role of domestic keepers while the male members of the household are away, just as Mary Wollstonecraft argues that women were “rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes” (*A Vindication* 1). The domestic sphere, however, is important in the novel as it provides values that are crucial for an individual to be able to function in the public sphere. As Poovey suggests, Shelley “sees imagination as an appetite that can and must be regulated -

specifically, by the give and take of domestic relationships” (123). Femininity and masculinity are juxtaposed in the novel, and when separated they are disastrous. Having a balance between what is domestic and what is public - between masculine and feminine values - the *shared* experience - appears to be the ideal.

Conclusion

This essay has aimed to offer a feminist viewpoint of the representation of monstrosity in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. I have established that feminine values at the beginning of the 19th century were above all connected to domesticity while men occupied the public sphere, and that Mary Wollstonecraft - Mary Shelley’s mother - criticized this division between male and female. In *Frankenstein*, the representation of gender corresponds to society’s expectations of male and female, but I have argued that this is intended, and that it actually demonstrate the consequences of separate spheres. The dominant discourse in *Frankenstein* is male, but the employment of a double-voiced discourse allows the articulation of a ‘muted’, feminine discourse, which I have argued brings forward the unrepresented female. This discourse is both in the form of a strategic use of silence and in the form of *écriture féminine*. Hence, while the articulation of ideology also is less explicitly critical in *Frankenstein* than in Mary Wollstonecraft’s feminist manifesto *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, both works seem to have the same convictions about the position of women in society and its consequences.

The female voice in *Frankenstein* stands for domestic values. Domesticity is throughout the whole novel are depicted as something positive, as long as it involves all (both men and female) members of the household, since relationships and mutual decisions are afforded prime value in the novel. This emphasizes “the shared rather than solitary experience” (Mellor, *Romanticism and Feminism* 8), which seems to have been Shelley’s ideal, compared to other Romantic male writers of her time, some of whose best-known works “emphasized the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental” (“Romanticism”). I have argued that Shelley’s experience of being a woman in the Romantic era affected her writing, which writing differs from and responds to the Romantic literary canon.

The critique of society in the novel thus focuses on the construction of gender roles in early 19th century, when women were tied to a domestic role while men were allowed pursuits in the public sphere – hence a society colored by masculine values. This division not only causes suffering but is also shown to be potentially dangerous, as the novel exposes a society in which men are allowed self-fulfilling imagination and pursuits, while not considering the consequences for other people. Such consideration is presented by Shelley as a value one learns from the domestic sphere, in which individuals are forced to work together instead of alone. If everyone was apprenticed in this, the pursuit of knowledge would have been more regulated and experimental catastrophes could have been avoided. Furthermore, if relationships and domestic affections are neglected, the result is catastrophic, as in the case of the creature, who becomes a ‘monster’. *Frankenstein* argues that this monstrosity could be avoided and that everyone would benefit from great valuing of feminine ideals in a patriarchal society.

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