

Saint Xavier University

“Finding the Mother”:  
The Wollstonecraftian Feminist Influence in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and its Media

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## **Abstract**

When Mary Shelley, eventual author of *Frankenstein*, was born, she had no indication that just days later, her mother, famed feminist critic Mary Wollstonecraft, would pass away due to complications following childbirth. Growing up without a mother present in her life, Shelley grew up yet with the voice of her mother impacting her writing and her beliefs, for she perused Wollstonecraft's texts avidly and studied them relentlessly. Shelley also had no indication that years later, she would implement the skills and innate talent imprinted upon her by her literary parents to create one of the most influential and relevant pieces of horror sci-fi literature ever written: *Frankenstein, the Modern Prometheus*. So, it is curious that when one considers the women of Shelley's first novel in relation to Wollstonecraft's firm attack on the misogynistic society of late eighteenth century / early nineteenth century Europe, one would find that the depictions could not be any more different. Where Wollstonecraft argued for equality of education and female independence, Shelley presented her women as meek, submissive, and dependent of the dominant male narrative. However, the curiosity of this thematic contradiction ends with a close reading of *Frankenstein*, which uncovers how Shelley cleverly structured the stories and characters of these women to actually advance the feminist messages Wollstonecraft left behind, rather than dismiss them. This essay will argue for a strong Wollstonecraftian influence in the creation of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and will further illustrate its influence in media (films) that were inspired by this tale.

## Introduction

“How differently you and I are organised. In my seventy-second year I am all cheerfulness, and never anticipate the evil day (with distressing feelings) till to do so is absolutely unavoidable. Would to God you were my daughter in all but my poverty! But I am afraid you are a Wollstonecraft.”<sup>1</sup>

The above reflection that William Godwin made in a letter addressed to his daughter is significant when it comes to studying literature written by Mary Shelley and that of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft. Despite not having known her mother, Shelley was imprinted with Wollstonecraft’s influence and beliefs, especially when it came to feminism and education, through perusal of Wollstonecraft’s literary works. Various scholars have taken notice of the Wollstonecraftian influence in Shelley’s work, and have credited it to the daughter’s desire to learn about her mother and her beliefs by reading her writings. There is also an argument to be made that Wollstonecraft’s voice has woven itself into the future works of Shelley, weaving together Shelley’s psychological need to be close to her mother, and a wish to keep her mind alive in the following generations.

However, when one considers the literary legacy that Mary Shelley was born into, one would find it perplexing that the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft – renowned and celebrated feminist critic known for her firm beliefs rooted in equality between sexes – would seem to write her first novel, *Frankenstein*, with little to no attention to the development of her female characters. The purpose of Shelley’s female characters, at a superficial glance, appears to go

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<sup>1</sup> See Marshall’s *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, Vol. 2, pg. 183; a letter written by Godwin to his daughter following the death of Percy Shelley. *LLMWS* notes a rocky relationship between Shelley and Godwin which progressively became more stilted with time. Despite being Shelley’s only living biological parent, Shelley was more like her mother in terms of beliefs and literary prestige. This statement hints at Godwin’s acknowledgement that his daughter is more unlike him and like her mother than previously realized.

against everything Wollstonecraft wished for women: they were to be educated, forgoing of delicacy, capable of having rational souls, independent, and intelligent. Wollstonecraft's most famous feminist text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, argues for these points and fights for the then radical perspective of women's minds being equal to that of men, and should be treated as such. Yet, Shelley's Frankensteinian women were presented as uneducated, lacked quality personality, appeared content with their existence being limited to the advancement of their male counterparts, and were all either killed or driven out of the text by the novel's end. This curiosity prompted a two-hundred-year long discussion among scholars. As the literary heiress that succeeded Wollstonecraft, what caused Shelley to smear her mother's legacy of feminism?

However, a closer inspection of the novel and its feminist themes proved that the exact opposite is true. Rather than contribute to that side of the conversation, this essay will instead serve to argue against it to emphasize how Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* to reflect the feminist messages left behind by her mother. Within the first part of this essay, an examination of Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as well as biographical information drawn from Florence Marshall's *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, will highlight how Shelley's *Frankenstein*, rather than denouncing feminism and undermining her mother's teachings with her portrayal of female characters, actually advances Wollstonecraft's messages. *Frankenstein's* female representation is also indicative of what can happen to women, and to the surrounding men, in society if Wollstonecraft's warnings are not heeded. The second part of this essay will take a look at how time, as well as a different media (films, in this instance), contributes to the analysis of female

representation in modern *Frankenstein* pop culture, as well as how Wollstonecraft's firm feminist influence has survived through the film adaptations inspired by Shelley and her creation.

### **PART ONE: CONTEMPORARY TEXT ANALYSIS**

Because of Wollstonecraft's position in feminist history as a strong advocate for women's rights and education, there is a strong tendency of Shelley scholars and critics to examine *Frankenstein* through a biographical lens in the attempt to "find the mother" in Shelley's writing. Shelley, having not known her mother, regardless grew up with her voice and beliefs in the writings she left behind. Florence Marshall references Shelley's possible internal thoughts of her mother and her works in the collection of biographical content of Shelley's life, *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, stating that she was "proud of her parentage, [idolized] the memory of her mother, about whom she gathered and treasured every scrap of information she could obtain, and of whose history and writings she probably now learned more than she had done at home" (Marshall 36). Shelley's life and future writings was undoubtedly impacted by Wollstonecraft's words, regardless of the distinct absence of her mother in her personal life. In the formation of the story that would become *Frankenstein*, the treatment of many of the social issues that arise in *Frankenstein* can be credited to Wollstonecraft's influence.

However, critics are divided on the question of whether or not to consider Wollstonecraft as an important influence on her daughter's work. Several critics have depicted their opinion to be that the literature of this mother-daughter pair should not be analyzed as linked, but rather that we should treat them as two separate and isolated writers. These critics do not explicitly state that Wollstonecraft's influence does not contribute a voice in Shelley's novel, but their arguments are centered on the idea that the source of Shelley's inspiration was exclusively due her own

experiences as a female in her time. Vanessa Dickerson connects the struggles the *Frankenstein* women face in the novel to Shelley's own personal turmoil as a woman during the nineteenth century, a period unforgiving to the advancement of women in society. Dickerson argues that it was these experiences that helped to shape the stories of the women in *Frankenstein*.

Specifically, Dickerson depicted these fictional women as "present but absent" figures in the novel, labeling them as the "ghosts" of *Frankenstein* (Dickerson 80); with *Frankenstein* dominated by the male voice and presence, the female voice and presence is subsequently pushed aside. Dickerson's argument exposes Shelley's personal struggles as a woman forced to the sidelines of history, and maintains that it was solely these ordeals that are reflected in the struggles of the female characters in *Frankenstein*.

Like Dickerson, Linda Gill holds the period's societal conduct towards women responsible for the inspiration behind *Frankenstein* and the treatment of its women. She differs slightly from Dickerson, however, in how she focuses on how the literature of *Frankenstein* reflects the abuse done to the *overall* female population in society, rather than concentrating exclusively on Shelley's own life experiences. Gill's argument is that *Frankenstein* demonstrates how "women are right to be paranoid, that women are killed by patriarchs and the power structure they perpetuate" (Gill 93), and it does this by reinventing the narrative of the popular Gothic Romance novel. *Frankenstein* twists the literary formula of Gothic Romance and essentially highlights the idea that women, as a collective, are not safe in the world they live in, and this is inclusive of all matters and issues in society. Shelley's world was full of violence against women; whether it was physical or social, women still withered and died within the male-dominated world they were forced to navigate through. Similar to Dickerson's argument,

Gill shows no indication of Shelley having been influenced by anything other than the environment she subsequently thrived and withered in, including that of Wollstonecraft.

The idea to view Shelley and Wollstonecraft as separate literary entities is not limited to just the future critics of Shelley and Wollstonecraft. Aaron Burr, former Vice-President of the United States, would write about Shelley that there was “scarcely a discernible trace of the mother”<sup>2</sup> after seeing both her and her half-sister Fanny for the first time. An argument could be made that Burr was referring to Shelley’s physical resemblance to her mother rather than speaking about her personality and beliefs; however, his phrasing of Shelley having “scarcely a discernible trace” of Wollstonecraft could just as likely refer to the whole of Shelley’s character rather than just the superficial appearance. Burr explicitly claims here that was no resemblance between the mother and daughter in any form.

Joyce Zonana presents a unique argument in that she believes a connection between Shelley and Wollstonecraft does exist within their writings, but that the connection should remain focused on the “literary and philosophical” connection between their works rather than that of the “psychological and personal” (Zonana 171). Zonana argues that the inspiration Shelley drew from her mother was not attributed to some deeper psychological meaning regarding her mother and the impact she left behind. However, Zonana’s appeal to the “unconscious conflict” Shelley possesses in relation to her mother’s presence in her novel and absence from her life indicates a contradiction in her argument. The language she employs when she introduces the “unconscious conflict” reflects a Freudian perspective; this language is linked to a psychological connection. Zonana is correct in that we would do well to separate Shelley’s life from her fiction, yet she is wrong in claiming that Shelley’s work does not heavily reflect not

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<sup>2</sup> See Marshall, *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, Vol. 1, pg. 21.

only her stance as a woman in the nineteenth century, but also her personal and psychological interpretations of the lessons of her deceased mother.

These critics – save for Zonana – do not explicitly denounce the possibility of Wollstonecraft’s voice playing a role in the formation of Shelley’s fictional women, but they do place sole accountability toward Shelley’s own life experiences as the source of the representation of feminine figures and their turmoil in society, and do not indicate that Wollstonecraft and Shelley’s work reflect one another. Yet, as will be argued for in this paper, to Shelley’s family, future literary scholars, and Shelley’s biographer, there is a striking resemblance in their literary themes and beliefs. According to William Godwin, Shelley’s father, she was “singularly bold, somewhat imperious, and active of mind. Her desire of knowledge is great, and her perseverance in everything she undertakes almost invincible,”<sup>3</sup> and much of who she was could be credited to what she learned from Wollstonecraft posthumously. Godwin claimed that neither Shelley nor her half-sister Fanny were raised in “exclusive attention to the system of their mother” (Marshall 35), but there is little doubt among Shelley scholars that Wollstonecraft’s work presented a major influence in Shelley’s writings, especially in *Frankenstein*.

### I. **On the Absent Mother**

Charles E. Robinson’s article “A Mother’s Daughter: An Intersection of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*” highlights the connection between the texts offered by both mother and daughter, highlighting how each presents similar literary themes. Robinson claims that “if we look with care... we can find Mary Wollstonecraft lurking in the corners of Mary Shelley’s most famous novel” (132). He relies

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pg. 35-36; a description of Shelley provided by Godwin in response to an inquiry of unknown origin that desired to know more about Shelley’s upbringing in relation to Wollstonecraft.



primarily on the written words of Wollstonecraft and Shelley to introduce textual evidence regarding Wollstonecraft's presence within Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

The most visible – as well as the most buried within the narrative – link depicting the connection between Shelley and Wollstonecraft in *Frankenstein* can be witnessed in the relationship between the character of Safie and her mother. Like Wollstonecraft in Shelley's life, Safie's mother is only referred to and never directly appears within the text, only seen in the paraphrased words of the monster as he narrates his encounters with the DeLacy family to Victor. In his tale, the monster makes mention of letters that Safie had written to Felix DeLacy in which she speaks her mother and the impact she left on Safie:

“The young girl spoke in high and enthusiastic terms of her mother, who, *born in freedom* spurned the *bondage* to which she was now reduced. She *instructed* her daughter in the tenets of her religion, and taught her to aspire to *higher powers of intellect*, and an *independence of spirit*. . . This lady died; but *her lessons were indelibly impressed on the mind* of Safie, who sickened at the prospect of [... being] allowed only to occupy herself with puerile amusements, ill suited to the *temper of her soul*, now accustomed to *grand ideas* and a noble emulation for virtue.”<sup>4</sup>

In this excerpt, two things are abundantly clear: the descriptions used to describe Safie's mother are verbatim to what characterizes Wollstonecraft, and the enthusiasm of Safie as she speaks of her mother showcases Shelley's own internal thoughts and emotions. This excerpt, tucked in the innermost narrative circle and at the core of the novel, is the closest that readers get to Shelley's deepest and most personal thoughts in relation to her mother.

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<sup>4</sup> See Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 139 (my emphasis added).

Zonana analyzes the relationship between Safie and her mother to reveal “an unconscious conflict” about Shelley’s mother.”<sup>5</sup> Shelley had grown up being “instructed” by her mother, despite Wollstonecraft’s absence in her life, and had taken her lessons and implemented them in *Frankenstein*. One detail of Safie’s relationship with her mother that should be considered when examining Wollstonecraft’s presence in *Frankenstein* is Safie’s education. The instruction of Safie’s mother “can be allegorized as the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft educating her daughter Mary Shelley...” (Robinson 134); the difference is that Safie’s mother directly taught her, while Shelley had to gain insight into her mother’s teachings through the perusal of her written works. Throughout her life, Shelley would consistently document what books produced by her parents that she was reading in short diary entries. Robinson’s timeline of when Shelley wrote the chapter containing Safie corresponds with the dates that Shelley read chapters of *Vindication*.<sup>6</sup> Safie’s story mirrors that of Shelley’s regarding the impact their mothers left behind: they both died, but their teachings and beliefs were imprinted in the minds of their daughters, who each sought a life filled with grander notions and ideas than what they were initially dealt. This section, right at the core of the novel and the innermost narrative, brings the reader as close as Shelley would allow into her true feelings regarding Wollstonecraft, her absence, and the lessons she left behind.

## II. On Education

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<sup>5</sup> See Joyce Zonana’s “‘They Will Prove the Truth of My Tale’: Safie’s Letters as the Feminist Core of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,” pg. 171.

<sup>6</sup> See Charles Robinson’s “A Mother’s Daughter: An Intersection of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,” pg. 135; note that *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* does not record this reading, though the themes resonating throughout Safie’s section reflect a Wollstonecraftian tone.

The topic of education is a theme of relevant and major importance in both *Frankenstein* and *Vindication*. Having grown up reading her mother's works, Shelley "could not have failed to notice that her mother's overtly didactic and argumentative *Vindication*... addressed the same issues that [...] Shelley herself was addressing" (133). Elements of Wollstonecraft's beliefs on education are reflected liberally throughout *Frankenstein*. Wollstonecraft did not find extremely "public" or extremely "private" schooling to be a suitable education for the youth, with "public" indicating an education that sends the child away from home, and "private" advocating for an education that completely isolates the child within their home. Wollstonecraft disclosed that the best method of education of one's children is to have it be done primarily with support of the parents themselves, in the comfort and safety of their home.<sup>7</sup> Yet, education at home must be done properly and regarding with utmost importance; Wollstonecraft states on the role of the mother in a child's education:

"To be a good mother—a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands... I now only mean to insist, that unless the understanding of woman be enlarged, and her character rendered more firm, by being allowed to govern her own conduct, she will never have sufficient sense or command of temper to manage her children properly."<sup>8</sup>

Parents – mothers, more notably in Wollstonecraft's argument – play a crucial role in stabilizing the development of the child's mind and education, but it must be performed in a balanced manner; it is when a child is completely isolated or completely buried under the influence of their parents that problems can arise. Mary Poovey also touches upon this topic to some extent, interjecting and separating the desire underlying the search for education in

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<sup>7</sup> See Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Chapter 12 for a more in-depth explanation.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Pg. 184-185.

its own category. Desire is, according to Poovey, “a drive that must be regulated – specifically, by the give-and-take of domestic relationships.”<sup>9</sup> In both cases of education and desire – a trait that could be tied to the pursuit of education, as read in *Frankenstein* – it is the family unit that stabilizes the child. Yet, if the aftereffects of “private” education can be linked to the aftereffects of desire, too much time spent within a domestic circle may serve to diminish the self-regulation the child needs, whereas a “public” education would serve to inflame it.

When Victor Frankenstein leaves his home to attend school in Ingolstadt, he not only separates himself from his family, but also from the safest form of education. His isolation from his family and from Wollstonecraft’s models for a child’s best instructors inevitably leads him down the path of destruction. Alphonse Frankenstein even attempts to steer Victor in the right direction when it came to his childhood interests; he tries to dissuade him from the alchemy book that Victor brought forth to him by dismissing it and calling it “sad trash,”<sup>10</sup> but fails to elaborate on why Victor should not pursue the subject. Victor’s mother, Caroline, does not even make an appearance when it comes to Victor’s education, implying an isolation from parent to child within the home that should never be present when the child is going through schooling. Alphonse’s subtle interference, while unfortunately not at all effective, indicates the path of education that Victor should have taken heed of, rather than leave in solitary to pursue subjects that his parents disagreed with. Alphonse was a weak example of a teacher to Victor, an instructor that failed him because he not “taken the pains to explain” to Victor why his interests were flawed and because he failed to take a stronger hand initially with Victor regarding the education he sought to pursue. Shelley touches on Wollstonecraft’s image of a parent who is also

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<sup>9</sup> See Mary Poovey’s “My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelly and the Feminization of Romanticism,” pg. 334.

<sup>10</sup> See Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 68.

a teacher to their children, and twists it to demonstrate what happens to a child when their most suitable instructor fails them.

Robinson also notes that both *Frankenstein* and *Vindication* portray the theme of education as a warning that “education pursued to an extreme was represented as the cause or at least the occasion of moral disaster...” (133). In the case of Wollstonecraft, the extremes of education are provided on the spectrum of private and public education systems. Too public, and the child will become deprived of “domestic affections” and find himself isolated from the warmth of his family life, but too private, and the child will possess an inflamed sense of self-value and hold too “high an opinion of their own importance.”<sup>11</sup> There must be a balance, or the child will be lost. Shelley takes this spectrum of education and extremes that can damage a student, and once again twists it to fit the horror story she is constructing with her mother’s influence. Victor reflects what happens when hunger for knowledge surpasses what is safe, as well as what occurs when a child’s education is too “public” and removes them from the influence of their parents. On the other hand, Elizabeth could reflect Wollstonecraft’s image of children having an education deemed too “private.” She may depict an evident portrayal of an inflated self-worth, but Elizabeth’s isolation at home without a formal education raises her to believe that the extent of her education to be brought up to be the perfect bride to Victor; women in *Frankenstein* believe education holds no place of importance for them in society. This distinction in their level of education serves in making the women purposefully inferior to the men, and subsequently harming their chances of being equals to their future spouses.

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Chapter 12, pg. 192.

The women of *Frankenstein*, overall, do not possess the hunger for education that Victor, Walton, or the monster do. When describing the differences in how education appeals to Elizabeth Lavenza and himself, Victor states:

“I delighted in investigating the facts relative to the actual world; she busied herself in following the aerial creations of the poets. The world was to me a secret, which I desired to discover; to her it was a vacancy, which she sought to people with imaginations of her own.”<sup>12</sup>

Just by comparing how the appeal of education effects both Elizabeth and Victor separately, it is clearly Victor, the man, who reaps the benefits of education in society. Victor’s language suggests that he is subtly putting down Elizabeth in how she views the world and its wonders; he concerns himself with the “facts” of the “actual world,” while she allegedly wants to fill an already bursting world with “imagination” and, what Victor would likely deem, useless contributions. In a letter written to Victor while he was away at Ingolstadt, Elizabeth reveals that she had recently conversed with Alphonse concerning Ernest Frankenstein, and the profession that he should pursue. She states:

“I therefore proposed that he should be a farmer; which you know, Cousin, is a favourite scheme of mine. A farmer’s life is a very *healthy happy* life; and the *least hurtful*, or rather the most *beneficial* profession of any. My uncle had an idea of his being educated as an advocate, that through his interest he might become a judge. But, beside that he is not at all fitted for such an occupation, it is certainly more creditable to cultivate the earth

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<sup>12</sup> *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 66; within the Gutenberg edition of the *Frankenstein* E-Book, there is a block-quote that further elaborates on the female/male approach to education: “Elizabeth was of a calmer and more concentrated disposition; but, with all my ardour, I was capable of a more intense application and *was more deeply smitten with the thirst for knowledge*. She busied herself with following the aerial creations of the poets; and in the majestic and wondrous scenes which surrounded our Swiss home... she found ample scope for admiration and delight. While my companion contemplated with a serious and satisfied spirit the magnificent *appearances* of things, I delighted in investigating their *causes*.” (my emphasis added).

for the sustenance of man, than to be the confidant, and sometimes the accomplice, of his vices... My uncle smiled, and said, that I ought to be an advocate myself, which put an end to the conversation on that subject.”<sup>13</sup>

Here, Elizabeth makes an argument for the valid and, in her opinion, healthier contributions that a farming lifestyle can provide to mankind, since an occupation in politics would reflect the darker side of human nature that she does not want Ernest – or anyone – subjected to.

Alphonse outwardly reflected a positive response, but his answering smile is more indicative of irritable indulgence rather than concurrence with Elizabeth’s opinion. When he suggests that Elizabeth should become involved as an advocate herself, despite having just heard her argument against one becoming an advocate, he is associating Elizabeth with the “dark side of human nature” in relation to her thoughts about education, and the conversation comes to a halt; the dry humor that precedes this end was his way of subtly dismissing her thoughts.

This snippet of Elizabeth’s letter highlights not only the simplistic approach women have to education, but also how men are quick to shut down any indication of female opinion when it comes to how men should pursue theirs.

### III. **On Marriage**

Marriage is a topic that can be construed as controversial, especially when examined in the writings of Shelley and Wollstonecraft. After all, Shelley and Wollstonecraft each have personally been involved in some scandalous affairs themselves – Wollstonecraft baring her first daughter, Fanny, out of wedlock with Captain Gilbert Imlay, and Shelley having partaken in an affair with then-married Percy Shelley before they ultimately wed. To both, however, the heart

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<sup>13</sup> See Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 89 (my emphasis added); a footnote for this section indicates Shelley’s likely interjection of Godwin’s “low opinion of lawyers.”

and reason for marriage should be love<sup>14</sup>, regardless of a present document proclaiming a lawful marriage. Yet, this was not the consensus of society during that time; children born out of wedlock and marital affairs were grounds for being outcast in society. However, even though it takes two for these scandals to occur, it is the women that suffer the scorn of society, as Wollstonecraft states, “Men, in their youth, are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties.”<sup>15</sup> This concept is undoubtedly portrayed in the theme of marriage as it appears in *Frankenstein*.

There are three instances of marriage that will be discussed as they appear in *Frankenstein*: Victor and Elizabeth, Caroline and Alphonse, and Felix and Safie. Out of the three, the latter couple is the only one that does not have proof of an official marriage within the pages of the novel; however, there are elements of marriage within their relationship that are worth studying. In the contents of Safie’s letters, it is revealed that Safie, having been deeply impacted by the idea of independence as a woman due to the lessons of her deceased mother, found “the prospect of marrying a Christian, and remaining in a country where women were allowed to take a rank in society” to be an “enchanting” notion.<sup>16</sup> This provides an ironic twist to the differing perspectives of the genders in relation to marriage: this time, it is not the man who views marriage as a secondary notion, but instead the woman. While an argument could be made that Safie and Felix truly loved one another, it appears that Safie’s quest for freedom and a desire

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<sup>14</sup> See Marshall’s *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, pg. 7; this was more the perspective of Wollstonecraft as claimed by Marshall, though I am operating on the consensus that Shelley believed the same, especially since she considered herself the wife of Percy Shelley in spite of his being married to his then-wife, Harriet.

<sup>15</sup> See Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Chapter 4, pg.81-82 (Longman Cultural Edition); this section highlights how the ideals of marriage differs between genders.

<sup>16</sup> See Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 139.



to be an independent ranking woman in society was her primary concern for getting married in the first place, rather than marrying for love.

Caroline and Alphonse's marriage is not viewed as an unhappy one, though the history behind their union adds a dubious element to the theme of marriage in *Frankenstein*. Before he introduced his own tale, Victor began his narration of the novel's events by telling Walton the story of his father. Of Alphonse Frankenstein, Victor had this to say:

“... my father had filled several public situations with honour and reputation. He was respected by all who knew him for his integrity and indefatigable attention to public business... it was not until *the decline of his life* that he *thought* of marrying, and *bestowing on the state sons* who might carry his virtues and his name down to posterity.”<sup>17</sup>

Alphonse's interest with marriage stems from the idea of having offspring – sons, more importantly – that would bear his name and carry forth his legacy, rather than the prospect of marrying a woman for love. When he met Caroline Beaufort, the daughter of one of Alphonse's most intimate friends, she was weeping by the coffin of her father; it was then that Alphonse “came like a protecting spirit to the poor girl, who committed herself to his care...” This sentence illustrates another method of how marriage is depicted in *Frankenstein* and in Shelley's society: marriage out of obligation, and where Caroline's interests lay in their union. Alphonse was, in a sense, Caroline's savior and protector following her father's death, and it was only “two years after this event [that] Caroline became his wife.”<sup>18</sup> This is not indicative of a marriage born out of love, but rather from a sense of duty to the man that had saved her. In addition, Caroline's actions, in the short time she exists in the novel, appeared to solely revolve around

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<sup>17</sup> *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 64 (my emphasis added).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 65.

pleasing her husband. This is especially true when she is on her deathbed, speaking to Victor and Elizabeth, stating, “My children... my firmest hopes of future happiness were placed on the prospect of your union. This expectation will now be the consolation of your father.”<sup>19</sup> It is with the union of Victor and Elizabeth that will fulfill the wishes of Alphonse to further progress his legacy and his primary concern with marriage in the first place, and as such fulfills Caroline’s role in the marriage to appease her husband’s desires.

This situation segues into the core example of marriage within the novel: Victor and Elizabeth. From their first meeting, it was made abundantly clear that Elizabeth was to serve as Victor’s eventual bride; however, in an ironic twist, it was not Victor or Alphonse who determined this, but rather Caroline. When Elizabeth was first brought into the family, Caroline became a witness to the “gentle and affectionate disposition” of Elizabeth, and this was the reasoning for Caroline to consider Elizabeth as Victor’s future wife.<sup>20</sup> The involvement of Caroline in Elizabeth’s fate correlates to an idea that Wollstonecraft abhorred, which was that women were essentially treated as the property of the men they were wedded to instead of an independent soul. Later revisions of *Frankenstein* would illustrate Victor seeing Elizabeth for the first time and calling her “mine” and labeling her as “a possession” of his, only serving to solidify this claim.

Throughout the novel, Elizabeth appears to adopt an enthusiastic stance on the prospect of marrying Victor. Since her aunt Caroline joined their hands and proclaimed her desire to have them one day marry, Elizabeth had been “determined to fulfill her duties with the greatest

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<sup>19</sup> *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 72.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pg. 66. In the Gutenberg E-Book, Caroline Frankenstein states: “I have a pretty present for my Victor—tomorrow he shall have it.” Caroline calling Elizabeth a “present” and referring to her as “it” reinforces the belief of women as property in marriage, rather than an equal; Victor’s labeling of Elizabeth as “mine” and “a possession” also stem from Gutenberg’s edition.

exactness,” taking the role of the mother within the Frankenstein family and caring for the younger Frankenstein boys, and readying herself to be the perfect bride for Victor when the time came for their union. However, on the actual day of the wedding, the day that “was to fulfil [Victor’s] wishes and [his] destiny,” Elizabeth’s demeanor fell into a melancholic state. Victor’s voice subverted Elizabeth’s true thoughts, which remain silent: he believed that “a presentiment of evil pervaded her”<sup>21</sup> and attributed this to her thinking of the secret he was keeping from her – unbeknownst to Elizabeth, Victor’s monster had threatened her spouse with an appearance on their wedding night, promising a fatal end. Though Victor originally believed the threat to allude to his own demise, it instead called for the death for Elizabeth, and unfortunately, he found out too late.

Elizabeth and Victor’s marriage is the most important union to examine in *Frankenstein* due to Elizabeth’s ultimate demise; symbolically, it not only illustrates the death of a woman, but the death of a woman’s independence and societal freedom. Whether Victor thought the monster’s threat was meant for him or not, Elizabeth’s life had an expiration date, and that was on the day of her wedding. Once Elizabeth was married to Victor, her life was doomed. If read in a superficial manner and/or in accordance with Victor’s beliefs of what was to occur on their wedding night, there are two outcomes for Elizabeth: she would either lose her husband and sole purpose for existing or she herself would be killed, and it was the latter that occurred. However, when viewed in a symbolic sense, Elizabeth’s death depicts what occurs to a woman as soon as she marries a man: she loses her independence and is expected to be entirely dependent on her husband and his desires, and essentially kills off any capability of an independent self. A married woman now belongs exclusively to her husband. The real horror of this scene is not only the

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<sup>21</sup> Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 195.

gruesome death that Elizabeth suffers, but also in what her marriage to Victor represents in a society of woman doomed to suffer this “death.”

#### IV. On Female Representation as a Whole

Many voices have contributed to the conversation of how the representation of females is addressed within *Frankenstein*, especially when the focus is reading the novel through a psychological lens. In the genesis of *Frankenstein* and throughout the drafts she formed, Shelley herself was experiencing life as a woman in the nineteenth century, and it is worth examining and reinforcing the argument that her status as such would have impacted how she presents her female characters. Vanessa Dickerson<sup>22</sup> speaks of a personal yet passive connection that Shelley, as a middle-class woman in the early 1800’s, had to the women she created, especially as her novel “[came] as part of a dream, as part of her feeling unconscious expressive self.”<sup>23</sup> By presenting *Frankenstein* as an introspective and psychoanalytic exercise, Dickerson links Shelley’s suppressed desires into the production of her novel and implies that this was how she was “able to explore safely the implications of what it meant to be essentially silent, the ghost of a self.”<sup>24</sup> Shelley’s unconscious mind may have allowed her to indulge in expressing her fears by jotting them down and projecting herself into her female creations. Dickerson’s argument relies on the indication that Shelley’s psychology was in linkage with that of her characters: “*Like Mary Shelley... the female characters in Frankenstein tend to be so meek and withdrawn as to appear superfluous and accessory.*”<sup>25</sup> Yet, Dickerson does not truly delve into how Shelley is “meek” in relation to her characters, though her point of Shelley being “withdrawn” may be disputed by the point that follows.

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<sup>22</sup> Dickerson, Vanessa. “The Ghost of a Self: Female Identity in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.”

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 81.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 80.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 82 (my emphasis)

Contributing to this concept of “absent presence,” there was initial speculation that *Frankenstein* had been written by a male author, popularly thought to be Percy Shelley, Mary’s husband. Yet, Shelley did not truly claim authorship to her creation until “some 13 years after the publication,”<sup>26</sup> highlighting the practiced role of being a “devout but nearly silent listener”<sup>27</sup> and serving as a background character for some time in her life to the men around her, until she finally spoke up of her rightful ownership to *Frankenstein* after Percy had been dead for nearly a decade. She only made her presence “known” when the male authority and presence had been removed from her life for more than a considerable amount of time. Shelley’s silence, despite it being eventually broken, placed her, for some time, on the same bottom rungs that her female characters belonged to as they strived to be “absent” presences in the male dominated worlds they all belonged and lived in.

Even after death, as demonstrated by Caroline Frankenstein, women are depicted in memories with a lack of authenticity to their character. This is shown when Victor comes across a portrait of his mother, to which he states: “It was an historical subject, painted at my father’s desire, and represented Caroline Beaufort in an agony of despair, kneeling by the coffin of her dead father.”<sup>28</sup> No textual evidence indicates the inclusion of any other portrait done to preserve the likelihood and memory of Caroline. It is this sole portrait that remains, depicting a tragic moment in Caroline’s life, not only due to her father’s death, but in how she was consequently indebted to marry Alphonse Frankenstein. The fact that it was Alphonse who desired this painting to be created illustrates further the idea of women as “ghosts;” he may have wanted to construct the moment in which he met and was connected to Caroline for the first time, but this

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<sup>26</sup> Dickerson, Vanessa. “The Ghost of a Self: Female Identity in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,” pg. 82.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pg. 81.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 100.

moment reflects a tragic and undesired moment in Caroline's life, and does not accurately depict her true character. Alphonse's choice to have the sole portrait of Caroline represent her devastation rather than anything else provides readers with the implication that men provide the history of women, and it is through their desires that women remain the "ghosts" of memories that *men* wish to remember them by, not as the women themselves were.

Returning to the concept of psychologically linking creator and creation, Shelley's private struggle as a woman during this time is projected in the portrayal of her women. There is a reason the Frankensteinian women all appear to be weak, passive, and inferior: they are the depiction of the inner turmoil that Shelley – and likely many perceptive women during this time – endured, projected as fictional characters on paper. Yet, the ordeals that the women in Frankenstein undergo are anything but fictional; they themselves are also "ghosts" in the story, serving the ultimate purpose of progressing the male narrative, and never being granted a voice of their own. The first female character that readers encounter is Margaret Saville, sister of voyager Robert Walton, to whom he is corresponding with via letters before encountering Victor Frankenstein. However, aside from learning her name and whatever subtle personality traits Robert hints at – isolated primarily to the fraternal concern she displayed off-text to her adventurous brother, for he makes it a point to attempt and dispel her worries, stating that "[he] is safe" and that he will be "cool, persevering, and prudent"<sup>29</sup> – readers never actually hear Margaret's voice, nor are Margaret's responses to Walton's letters shown anywhere in the text; she is completely and utterly silent, much like the rest of her textual female companions. In fact, all the women in *Frankenstein* do not have a voice of their own; each of their stories, descriptions, and experiences are told through the paraphrased words of men. The sole exception

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<sup>29</sup> Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 57; each letter that Walton sends to Margaret contains some type of reassurance to his safety, indicating her concern, but not revealing much else about the absent and voiceless sister.

to this rule is Elizabeth, whose letter to Victor remains to be the presence of a female's voice anywhere in the novel. Their words, and their presences, are subverted to make way for the male voices to be prominent.

James R. Davis<sup>30</sup> also correlates with Dickerson's ideas of the subversion of the feminine voice to solidify that of the masculine voice, but presents a unique twist to this argument: rather than deprecate the advancement of females, the lack of attention to the women of *Frankenstein* works to instead subvert the advancement of male characters and how Shelley exposes "the social consequences of their misogyny" by their actions, direct and indirect, done to the female characters of *Frankenstein*. Davis proposes that the mannerisms that both Victor Frankenstein and his monster have in response to women stems from their assumptions that "women have a far greater capacity for evil than men,"<sup>31</sup> yet, this also depicts how much of the violence and harm done to women in the novel is a result of males attempting to embody all aspects of the female's purpose – in this case, their sole biological purpose of reproduction – into their own lives (i.e. Victor's arc of creating life out of death and thereby producing the monster) to unconsciously render the other sex moot. By attempting to erase a biological purpose that should solely belong to women, *Frankenstein* not only demonstrates how disastrous this forced erasure and masculine attempt at "giving birth" can be, but also acts as a warning of what the masculine narrative tradition, which includes literal and symbolic "silencing" of women, can do to society.

Davis can be linked to Dickerson and Robinson's arguments that credit much of the narrative elements Shelley uses as emerging from the ordeals of her personal life, especially in relation to Wollstonecraft's influence on her writing. He takes the overarching story of Elizabeth Lavenza, and notes that "some details in Elizabeth's story more closely resemble the

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<sup>30</sup> See James Davis' "*Frankenstein* and the Subversion of the Masculine Voice."

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 310.

autobiography of Mary Shelley...”<sup>32</sup> (316). With her mother dying as a result of complications following her birth and a father renowned in his field but neglectful, Shelley illustrates certain aspects of her life into the life of Elizabeth, but this can apply to the other female characters that appear within her book. This returns us to Wollstonecraft’s indirect involvement in the development of the novel as a personal element that is crucial in the study of feminism and female representation in *Frankenstein*. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in their chapter “Horror’s Twin: Mary Shelley’s Monstrous Eve,” *Frankenstein* has “highly charged connections between femaleness and literariness” that were “established specifically in relation to the controversial figure of her dead mother.”<sup>33</sup> Drawing from *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft states:

“Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship, instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens.”<sup>34</sup>

Here, Wollstonecraft illustrates the purpose of the feminist agenda that she is advocating for within *Vindication*, or at least pushing the boundary of what was deemed the appropriate limit in which one could address the necessity for feminism during that time: rather than proving detrimental, by educating and accepting women as capable members of society, Wollstonecraft argues that this would assist in better forming them as exceptional wives and mothers. Simultaneously, however, Shelley’s *Frankenstein* makes it a point to address the failures of mothers in the story that were previously failed by their society.

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<sup>32</sup> Davis, James. “*Frankenstein* and the Subversion of the Masculine Voice,” pg. 316.

<sup>33</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Pg. 222.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pg. 182.



Caroline was “indulgent” with her children’s education and ensured that it was “never forced,”<sup>35</sup> provided Victor no certain path for his studies that eventually drove him away from home to pursue ill-advised feats, and drafted Elizabeth into a marriage with her son as conforming act to societal norms; all in all, a poor example of a mother in accordance to the Wollstonecraftian belief. Even in scenes following her death, her presence as a mother – as well as a woman – is not shown in a good light;

Yet, aside from Caroline, there is one brief example of a biological mother that “failed” their child within the text: Madame Moritz, the mother of Justine. It is through Elizabeth’s letter – once more demonstrating the need for a buffer when recounting a woman’s story, despite Elizabeth being female herself – that readers learn of Justine history, which states:

“Madame Moritz, her mother, was a widow with four children, of whom Justine was the third. The girl had always been the favourite of her father; but, through a strange perversity, her mother could not endure her, and, after the death of M. Moritz, treated her very ill.”<sup>36</sup>

Though it’s never made entirely clear why it occurred, the failure of Justine’s mother to love her appropriately is apparent here, and she emotionally abandons her before Justine eventually comes into the Frankenstein home.

In addition, there are two other female characters that have adopted the maternal position enough to warrant them as “failed mothers” within this novel: Elizabeth and Justine. Following Caroline’s death, Elizabeth took on the role of the mother within the Frankenstein household, taking responsibility over the children and caring for them as a mother would. Yet, Davis uses Elizabeth as an example of a female, and a mother, that Wollstonecraft would have scorned, as

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<sup>35</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 67

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 90.

Elizabeth's virtuous traits such as "soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste" would be, according to Wollstonecraft's argument in *Vindication*, "almost synonymous with epithets of weakness."<sup>37</sup> After the death of Caroline, with the Frankenstein house filled with mourning, Elizabeth "felt that that most imperious *duty*, of rendering her uncle and cousins happy, had devolved upon her" and was "entirely forgetful of herself."<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth's failure here is her inability to take her own despair and ordeal into account. One may find her stance admirable, since she places the needs and comfort of her family above that of her own (like a mother would), but there is no textual proof of her ever truly dealing with her own emotions and gaining a true sense of self. She merely slips into the role that was expected of her, without question, and without real contemplation of what she herself desired to fulfil Caroline's desire for her to "supply [her] place to [her] younger cousins."<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth's first real trial as a mother commences with the death of young William, the first victim of the monster and the youngest Frankenstein child. In a letter to Victor, Alphonse recounts:

"She was very earnest to see [William's] corpse... and entering the room where it lay, hastily examined the neck of the victim, and clasping her hands exclaimed, 'O God! I have murdered my darling infant!' ... Come, dearest Victor; you alone can console Elizabeth. She weeps continually, and accuses herself unjustly as the cause of his death..."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pg. 25; this is further explored in Davis' "*Frankenstein and the Subversion of the Masculine Voice*," pg. 317.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 73; in the Gutenberg E-book edition, a later text stated that Elizabeth "veiled her grief and strove to act the comforter to [the Frankensteins]" and "forgot even *her own regret in her endeavours to make [them] forget.*" (my emphasis).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 72.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 96.

That Elizabeth was so quick to accuse herself, the surrogate mother of William, despite clearly not having any role in his death, indicates more than a mere knee-jerk response of self-blame that any mother would endure in such a situation; it could also indicate the harsh perspectives of society during that time in relation to how mothers were viewed; as Wollstonecraft states, “Meek wives are, in general, foolish mothers.”<sup>41</sup>

Within the same sequence following William’s death, it’s revealed that Justine was apprehended for his murder and set for trial, despite being wholly innocent and presented as the only possible suspect due to highly circumstantial evidence: Caroline’s picture, which had been missing from William’s person, had been in her pocket, and was deemed to be “the temptation of the murderer.”<sup>42</sup> That it was Caroline’s photograph – which represents the Frankenstein matriarch – that served to be the “temptation” for the alleged criminal Justine, speaks to an interesting point, which is that maternal ambition can cause destruction. Margit Stange<sup>43</sup> touches upon this topic in examining Justine’s status as a female citizen within Frankenstein, and according to Stange, the trial and subsequent execution of Justine “dramatizes the republic’s mobilization of juridical prosecution against the paradigmatic loving women, the mother.”<sup>44</sup> Justine’s character symbolically demonstrates how all women during this time, especially mothers, are placed “on trial,”<sup>45</sup> and illustrates the societal scheme that ensure that any women that ventures away from or fails in this duty is “a saboteuse and a criminal.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pg. 184.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, pg. 101.

<sup>43</sup> Stange, Margit. “You Must Create a Female: Republican Order and its Natural Base in *Frankenstein*.”

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 317.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 316.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 317.

Clearly, much can be said about the canonical women within the original *Frankenstein* text; from their education, to their purposes in society, to their failures as mothers, Shelley relentlessly warns readers with images of women if they continue to endure the unequal trials forced upon them from birth. Yet, one character remains that could contribute to the conversation of feminism and its presence (or absence) in Shelley's society: the monster himself. Gilbert and Gubar<sup>47</sup> have noted the way the monster is presented as Shelley's "Monstrous Eve," and given the novel's heavy allusions to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, it is not difficult to see why such a connection was made. Drawing from the famed religious story, Eve has been accused and criticized as being the downfall of man, since it was by her initial disobedience to God's will that led her to coax Adam to also eat fruit from the Forbidden Tree, inevitably dooming humanity. In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft labels Eve (as depicted by Milton) as "our first frail mother," scorning at the implication that due to this First Woman, women are "designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation."<sup>48</sup>

In *Frankenstein*, Shelley also explores the allusion of Eve but adds her own twist to it: she places this role firmly within the character of the monster. Much like how Eve was created by one of Adam's ribs, the monster was created out of the anatomy of others, and was brought to life in an "unnatural" birth – Victor Frankenstein (God) "breathing life" into the creature. In addition, both Eve and the monster symbolize the destruction and damnation of mankind; as Gilbert and Gubar have noted, "what misery th' inabstinence of Eve / Shall bring on men."<sup>49</sup> Where Wollstonecraft presents Eve as a "frail mother," poised as a delicate

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<sup>47</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pg. 36.

<sup>49</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, pg. 221.

and gentle creature, Shelley takes the image of Eve and morphs it into the other extreme – a monstrous creature that purposefully dooms humanity. In doing so, Shelley presents yet another opposition for readers to consider: women as frail and gentle versus women as monstrous brutes. If Shelley’s novel serves as a warning to her readers about the dangers of not abiding by the lessons of Wollstonecraft, then this represents what can occur if society pushes women to the brink; either way, if no balance is determined, if no equality is granted, women will surely revolt. Shelley’s *Frankenstein* ultimately depicts the outcomes of a society in which Wollstonecraft’s teachings are not heeded. Fictional and extravagant the novel’s events may be, there is nothing fictional about the series of social and political issues that are depicted within the novel, especially when dealing with feminism.

## **PART TWO: MODERN FILM ADAPTION**

Representation within literature, regardless of the medium, has a tendency of shifting and adapting over time. *Frankenstein* was written in the early 1800’s, and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was written earlier still. Wollstonecraft’s critical argument during the late eighteenth century pushed for a feminist agenda, but her message was oriented toward convincing the male-dominated society that by abiding by the guidelines and arguments she poses, women will become better wives, mothers, and citizens. This was an agenda that was appropriate for the society of Wollstonecraft and Shelley’s time. As the years progressed, however, and the world encountered an age of technology, representation through motion picture, and adopted more aggressive methods in confronting social issues, the feminist agenda that Wollstonecraft and Shelley pushed for – as well as the messages associated with it – likely adapted to fit the atmospheres of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Now, the need for feminism is not

merely so that women will become wives and mothers, but so that the contemporary society acknowledges the right of women to be viewed as equal to their male counterparts in a variety of social and political capacities. The question now shifts from how female representation was portrayed and what it accomplished in a literary sense during Wollstonecraft and Shelley's time, to how the same concept may or may not have progressed throughout time, especially with a focus on a new medium in depicting the story of *Frankenstein*.

The necessity of Wollstonecraft's message regarding women and the portrayal of female characters within media inspired by Shelley's novel might have adapted; however, the themes of what Shelley introduced are still concepts that warrant analysis. This section will examine three separate film adaptations inspired by Shelley's *Frankenstein*: James Whale's *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), Jed Mercurio's *Frankenstein* (2007), and Paul McGuigan's *Victor Frankenstein* (2015). By studying these films, I intend to analyze how the canonical representation of female characters and Wollstonecraft's influences in the novel survive over time, and how these themes adapt and evolve from the first adaptation to the most recent adaptation. Mercurio's *Frankenstein* (2007) adds a gender-twist that serves to provide deeper insight into the differences between males and females as portrayed in *Frankenstein*, and how its interpretation of the plot indicates more than a superficial approach to gender dynamics in *Frankenstein*.

### **THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN (1935)**

Erin Hawking's article "The Bride and Her Afterlife: Female Frankenstein Monsters on Page and Screen" examines James Whale's 1935 film adaptation, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, and the implication of making the female monster as the titular character. Adding the word "bride" into the title of the film not only builds up the anticipation for the female monster's arrival, but also takes some of the focus away from the original male concentration of the *Frankenstein* plot.

However, this anticipation is immediately diminished at the abrupt removal of the female monster when she is destroyed following her rejection of the male monster, quickly shifting the focus back onto the two male leads. Aside from the title, a major plot element of the film that distinguishes itself from the canon of the novel was the level of intellect the female monster (Elsa Lanchester) actively portrays on-screen. This is in opposition to Shelley's scene in the novel where Victor's paranoia of a female monster and her abilities of reproduction cause him to brutally destroy her before she has a chance to prove her rationality. Hawking highlights Whales' decision to have the female monster live long enough to view "the monstrosity of her potential suitor" (Hawking 223) when she sets eyes on the male monster and then, in a moment of rational thought, employs her agency and rejects the monster. This displays an innate trait of women that Wollstonecraft argues for in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which is that women possess "rational souls" (Zonana 171) and are capable having intelligent minds; the female monster, despite having just been created, possessed enough rationality and common sense that upon understanding the purpose of her creation, she instantly judges whether it is a good or a bad purpose and exercises a trait that is absent from the general female populace: independent agency.

It is due to this alien, feminine trait coming forth that results in the consequent destruction of the female monster; her outright rejection of her purpose she was created for, which was solely to be the companion to the male monster, was a small part in the subtle, bigger picture of the representation of the female sex's struggle. Hawking acknowledges the dismissal of the canonical reason behind the death of the female monster in *Frankenstein* – Victor's horror at the possibility of reproduction. It is this dismissal that introduces the idea of the female monster being destroyed by the men of *Frankenstein* not because of her sexual prowess or

reproduction abilities, but because of her demonstrated ability to match and even surpass the rational mind of her male counterpart, and because she uses it to reject her intended purpose of submitting to his desire for her. This correlates with a previous argument made by Davis, of woman [having] a far greater capacity for evil than men,” (Davis 310); by refusing to submit to the desires of the male monster, the female monster displays her independence and hints at a stronger mind than what he possesses, and due to this foreign and therefore “evil” trait, he kills her.

A film can be examined in the same manner as a close-reading of a text. Within movies, the smallest detail can unveil an entire separate side to the story that a superficial viewing would never have displayed to the casual viewer. Whales made a curious decision to include a scene in his film containing a fictional portrayal of Mary Shelley. Made even more curious was the choice to have actress Elsa Lanchester play the part of Mary Shelley alongside that of her role as the bride of Frankenstein’s monster. This casting detail serves to connect the literary world to that of our world, linking the fictional female monster to the historical Mary Shelley; the bride of Frankenstein and Shelley become the vessels of the typical nineteenth century woman’s character and struggles. The choice of having Lanchester play both the female monster and Mary Shelley was not without design; this added element communicates the message that when the female monster is killed, so too is Mary Shelley killed. Symbolically, Whales demonstrates the destruction of the anticipated bride as a “death” to fictional character under the hands of men, and contributes the silencing of actual women when the female monster’s death is linked to that of Mary Shelley. Whales is not voicing a personal preference for women to become silenced, but instead demonstrates the inability for a woman to refuse a man’s desires without dire and even fatal consequences.



## VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN (2015)

Paul McGuigan's *Victor Frankenstein* (2015) jumps eighty years into the future following the release of Whales' *The Bride of Frankenstein*, and is the most recent film adaption inspired by the original novel. As such, there is no scholarship available that has incorporated the thematic possible messages of feminism, or perhaps lack thereof, of this film into the overall study of female representation within *Frankenstein's* media. As the most recent artifact depicting the events of the original novel, what is revealed in *Victor Frankenstein* will serve to illustrate whether or not, in the eighty years since the first motion picture adaption, the conversation of feminism has progressed – and if Wollstonecraft's influence has survived and thrived on-screen in works inspired by that of her daughter – or if modern *Frankenstein* media remains loyal to the representation of women as shown in the original text, demonstrating no true progression of feminism.

McGuigan's film uniquely follows the story of Igor Straussman (Daniel Radcliffe), a hunchback who has grown up as clown in the circus, and representative of a fictional character addition to Shelley's novel. Within the film, Igor demonstrates strong passions toward the medical field, and he educates himself on the human anatomy with medical knowledge acquired from stolen books. After Victor (James McAvoy) encounters Igor at the circus and assists him in saving an injured aerialist, he is impressed by the vast medical knowledge Igor demonstrates and rescues him. Victor fixes Igor's hunchback – which turned out to be a large fluid cyst – and corrects his spinal alignment with a back brace. As Igor spends more time around the scientific experiments being conducted by Victor and adds his own valuable input, the two of them partner up to achieve the ultimate goal: creating life out of death.

*Victor Frankenstein*, similar to how Shelley constructed her story, references the necessity for feminism and female representation in a manner that appears satirical. Where Shelley indirectly exploited the horrific extremes of male misogyny in her text, McGuigan's film circulates this same notion by ridiculing certain ideas that crop up within various scenes, particularly in relation to women's roles. During a scene in which Victor and Igor are celebrating the scientific advancements they made in reviving dead organs and body parts, Victor drunkenly confronts two women who are sitting with him and Igor about their role in conception. He proclaims, "Fertilization needn't take place inside the female body!... why can't [sperm] independently move towards the egg in, say, a *bucket*?" to which one of the women responds, "Where does the *mother* fit in?" This conversation not only showcases the intention to do away with the female's biological purpose of fertilizing a child within her own body (nearly identical to the novel Victor's endeavor to "give birth" to a creature and taking over the reproductive purpose women encapsulate), but also demonstrates the collective view of society that the idea of women engaging in sexual relations – even if she were married and trying for a child – is ghastly. In addition, Victor's inebriation heightens the level of ridiculousness produced by this suggestion, and the scene serves as an indirect response to misogynistic tendencies aimed at mothers of the nineteenth century that further advances the necessary message of the importance of mothers in the role of childbirth and the upbringing of their children.

Overall, women (Lorelei) are granted a bit more agency than would be expected of a film that takes place in nineteenth century Europe, and McGuigan illustrates a few instances in which his film advances the need for feminism and scorns the misogynistic tendencies of men, yet there do exist a few indications of the accepted canonical view of women during this period. When Igor sees Lorelai for the first time since her accident, she confesses that she was accompanying a

homosexual baron as “consort, in public.” Once more, this delves into the idea that women of nineteenth century Europe were placed in the public eye to do the bidding of men; in Lorelei’s case, she is posing as the consort of a man who desired to hide his homosexuality, and so recruited her to assist him. A few moments later in the film, Victor tells Igor that he shouldn’t see Lorelei again, for she was “uneducated, superstitious, [and] a distraction from [their] work.” This correlates with the notion of innocence that Wollstonecraft explores in *Vindication* stating:

“Men, indeed, appear to me to act in a very unphilosophical manner when they try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of *childhood*... Children, I grant, should be *innocent*; but when the epithet is applied to men, or women, it is but a civil term for *weakness*.”<sup>50</sup>

Lorelei is accused of being “uneducated” and “superstitious” because she found the experiments that Victor and Igor were engaging in as “unsettling,” which, to the general consensus, is a perfectly sane and educated response. Yet, challenged by an “inferior” perspective, Victor then relies on Lorelei’s lowered status as a woman, and holds no qualm about using it to his advantage.

Yet, for all the valid points (both good and bad) of feminism that demonstrated within the film, this is not a true *Frankenstein* story, at least regarding the representation of women. While Victor remains an integral part of the film, serving as a lead character alongside Igor, the story is clearly centered around the experiences of the assistant. This affects the tale in that the narrative is now focused on the relationships that Igor, not Victor, forms, and the character appearances – or, in this case, absences – reflect as much. Gone are Elizabeth, Caroline, Justine, Safie, and Agatha; all the women that had shaped the female presence in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* are

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<sup>50</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pg. 37 (my emphasis added).

missing from the film, replaced by Igor's love interest Lorelei (Jessica Brown Finley), the female aerialist he saved with Victor. The decision to take away the core female characters of the original text consequently deprives the audience of an accurate portrayal of female representation loyal to Shelley's novel. Igor Straussman, or just Igor in a variety of older *Frankenstein* films, was a fictional addition to the *Frankenstein* story; his character never existed within the pages of the original novel. Therefore, how this film depicts women is solely focused on the character of Lorelei, who, like Igor, holds no place within the *Frankenstein* canon, especially when it comes to studying the theme of feminism and female representation in accordance to Wollstonecraft's teachings on-screen.

### **FRANKENSTEIN (2007)**

Perhaps one of the most effective methods of analyzing the modern female representation in *Frankenstein* films is to lend itself to a different and mode of interpretation; as the message of feminism adapted, so too has the creative nature of how these issues can be highlighted within motion pictures. Jed Mercurio's *Frankenstein* (2007) takes up this challenge of presenting these social issues in a manner hadn't been explored at that point: within this film, Victor Frankenstein instead becomes Victoria Frankenstein, providing audiences not only with an alternative reading of the original novel, but also with a fresh take on how to examine the deconstruction of Victor's character, and of his motives, if his gender was changed to that of a female. By purposefully omitting the use of "Victoria" anywhere in the title, merely entitling the film *Frankenstein*, there is an attempt to focus on Frankenstein as a character, rather than addressing his/her sex. Baysar Taniyan<sup>51</sup> provides a detailed examination of *Frankenstein*, and claims that this film "deconstruct[s] the established pattern of the tale and reconstruct[s] it under new terms of

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<sup>51</sup> Taniyan, Baysar. "Gender in the Monster: Dr. Frankenstein as a Mother."

gender.”<sup>52</sup> Taniyan argues that while the novel explores the relationship between creator and creation (Victor and the monster) to be analyzed through a “religious viewpoint,” the film is centered on a “maternal relationship”<sup>53</sup> between the character of Victoria Frankenstein and of her creation.

*Frankenstein* stars Helen McCrory as Victoria Frankenstein, a scientist who has, at the film’s commencement, made a breakthrough in the manipulation of stem cells. It’s revealed that the strives she is making in her research are working toward the possibility of creating new organs viable for transplant operations; what motivates her is her young son William, who is undergoing multiple organ failure, and that her research may provide advancements in medical science and technology so that he stands a chance at surviving his illness. When her request to take her research to the next phase – transplanting the heart she created via manipulation of stem cells – is rejected, Victoria becomes desperate, and unbeknownst to her colleagues, secretly slips a variety of stem cells (liver, kidneys, etc.) along with some of William’s DNA into the procedure they were performing so as to create a whole body, rather than just the preapproved hearts. This illustrates one key difference between Victor and Victoria: the motive behind their creation. While Victor demonstrated hunger for knowledge and allowed that to drive his ambition to create life from death, Victoria desire to preserve the life of her child; her life’s work was due to the love she had for her son, and she is “portrayed not just as a passionate scientist but as a caring mother.”<sup>54</sup> The interjection of William’s DNA into the procedure – and into the creation – also established “a close connection – indeed a kinship” between Victoria and the creature, and introduces the previously foreign nature of “genuine contact”<sup>55</sup> between

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pg. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Taniyan, Baysar. “Gender in the Monster: Dr. Frankenstein as a Mother.” Pg. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, pg. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, pg. 5.

Frankenstein and the creation. This once more demonstrates how Victor and Victoria differ from one another in their responses to the monster; Victor scorned and rejects his monster, while Victoria eventually comes to embrace her creation as her own son, especially when her biological son passes away. She even grants the creation a name – UX, after the name of the scientific project she was working on, Universal Xenograph – whereas Shelley made the decision to have Victor never truly name his monster.

While these aspects of the film are critical to the representation of females within a separate media of the novel, *Frankenstein* also embodies a crucial factor that pertains to both Shelley and Wollstonecraft's beliefs: the education she provides for her child, or "children." During an early scene with her son, Victoria is seen gently encouraging teaching William with an abacus, only allowing him to play after he had completed his lessons with her. Even though William dies later in the film, Victoria's maternal instinct never does, nor did her desire to properly educate her children; this innate trait and responsibility was instead passed on to UX, and the last sequence depicts Victoria actively educating UX under surveillance as they are being transported to another facility. While Shelley's novel highlights the dangers of education taken to the extremes (as examined in the first part), there is a semblance of how *Frankenstein* presents the topic of education in relation to Wollstonecraft's model. The best method of education, according to Wollstonecraft, is for one's children to be educated primarily with the support of the parents. Victoria may not have raised UX as she had with her son, nor has she ever truly introduced him to a "home," but she ultimately remained by him and supported him, and the movie ends with her educating him, just as Wollstonecraft would have desired for mothers to do for their children.

It is all of these factors, each of which differ from Victor's own characterizations and traits, that allow for Mercurio's 2007 adaption to create a fresh interpretation of gender constructs in relation to those presented in the original text. The concept and message of feminism is a force that is passively present in the crevices of the film, reinforced by the decision to change the gender of the protagonist from the start. *Frankenstein* illustrates how this simple action of changing the gender of Victor Frankenstein into Victoria allows for a completely different character, armed with different motives and aspirations, and a different story. Yet, the message remains the same: Frankenstein, both the text and the story, demonstrate the necessity for feminism, and indicates a heavy presence of Wollstonecraft's influences, even after almost eighty years.

## **Conclusion**

Born into a family of literary fame, but also into a world in desperate need of feminism and female empowerment, Shelley's *Frankenstein* helped to pave the path for both horror sci-fi and female novelists. Her upbringing, while not following any strict curriculum set by her father, was centered on the teachings and writings left behind by her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft. While the presentation and in-text treatment of Shelley's Frankensteinian women were, if read superficially, the embodiment of everything scorned by the Wollstonecraftian model of how women should be conducted in society, Shelley clearly held a torch for the messages of her mother, and ensured to continue this conversation within her first novel to reflect them in an indirect, but clear, manner. Shelley's *Frankenstein* advances Wollstonecraft's messages rather than undermining or dismissing them. In examining both the original text, as well as a spectrum of films inspired by the novel's events, it is noticeable that Wollstonecraft's firm feminist

influence has survived, and will continue to survive, through the scholarly conversations held about both *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and in the progeny of her daughter's creation.

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