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Frankenstein: A Feminist Interpretation of Gender Construction

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Abstract

There is a long history of exploring *Frankenstein* through a feminist lens. A historical examination that explores Mary Shelley's life and the literature that influenced her writing is key to understanding the feminist elements of *Frankenstein*. Additionally, this paper will call upon Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity to examine the ways in which Victor's monster constructs his own gender identity based upon his creator's own flawed masculinity. Victor's gender expression is defined by the time period in which he was created and also by the masculine literature of the time. While masculine literature helped to define both the monster's and Victor's gender, there is also a feminist current found within the text. When further examined, this feminist current reveals itself to be Mary Wollstonecraft's work, Shelley's mother, which functions to assert the feminist voice in the novel. In this analysis, gender construction and the creature's birth will be examined. This paper asserts that the creature's violent and toxic concept of gender stems from his parting with the De Lacey family, his books, and mainly from his relationship with his creator. Moreover, his gender construction is reinforced by his choice of victims and even further by how Victor responds to these killings. Furthermore, when the creature attempts to recreate Victor's life the results only end in tragedy as the monster is not able to be part of the Social Contract Theory. In the end, Victor and the monster demonstrate the pitfalls of first-generation Romanticism and the inflation of self.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* provides a unique source for feminist interpretation and gender construction. As Diane Long Hoeveler explains, *Frankenstein* is a text that both depicts societal attitudes while also presenting an argument against them (Hoeveler 48). It is difficult to say if Shelley herself comments on the gender roles of her time; however, her mother Mary Wollstonecraft discusses gender, and it is clear that Shelley is influenced by her mother's work. With this history in mind, this examination will look at an older text through a modern lens. Shelley comments on a toxic conceptualization of the male gender and the ill effects associated with it, part of which is based on literature from her time period. This paper will explain how Victor's monster conceptualizes his own gender to be more like his creator. More specifically, it also draws from Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Zoe Beenstock's article on Rousseau's Social Contract Theory to assert an interpretation of gender construction. The monster's gender is based on his own perverted perception of Victor's gender.

This paper will first explore gender construction and the creature's birth. Next, it will assert that the creature's violent and toxic concept of gender stems from his parting with the De Lacey family, his books, and mainly from his relationship with his creator. Following that, it will examine how his gender construction is reinforced by his choice of victims and even further by how Victor responds to these killings. Furthermore, the analysis will argue that when the creature attempts to recreate Victor's life the results only end in tragedy as the monster is not able to be part of the Social Contract Theory. In the end, Victor and the monster demonstrate the pitfalls of first-generation Romanticism and the inflation of self.

Simone de Beauvoir provides credence to the argument that gender is constructed. In her book *The Second Sex*, she distinguishes the difference between biological and the social cultural gender. Beauvoir explains, "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 269). Gender is a social and cultural construct compared to sex which is a biological definition of humans. Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity also solidifies this argument. Gender performativity is the repeated process of imitating gender stereotypes or expectations (Butler 179). With these models in mind, the argument that the monster is female, as other feminist theorists have explored, is not what is being argued. Instead, this paper addresses how the monster's gender is determined to be masculine.

As with humans, the monster's gender is constructed through society and culture, but his image of gender is more complex than it is for most humans. Victor creates the monster outside of the birthing process found in all mammals. His creation is by one person, a man, without the help of a woman, and his very creation is outside of the norm (Shelley 56). In "'Passages' In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: Toward a Feminist Figure of Humanity?" Pon discusses the idea of masculine creation outside of the influence of the feminine. She contends that the monster, as a creation, is strictly masculine without the influence of the feminine. Further, Victor's act of creation leaves behind the traditionally necessary female counterpart and this is further demonstrated by the deaths of women in the narrative (Pon 37). One common understanding is that the monster is

constructed partially from animals' materials but this does not give a full understanding of his creation. The creature is not reanimated flesh and Victor must construct a brain for the creature, who is born with a new consciousness as he remembers when he first comes into being, "I remember the original era of my being: all of the events of that period appear confused and indistinct" (Shelley 99). He is never named because that would imply that he is human when he is not. In this way, the creature is still a biological birth, but not a human one. Victor creates life without a woman with his "instruments of life" (Shelley 56) and he infuses "a spark of being" (Shelley 56) into the monster.

Pon argues that the masculine creation, built out of materials that should create beauty, instead creates horror. Victor is forced to enlarge the creature in order to create him and this adds to his monstrous appearance (Pon 38). Pon explains the consequences of the creation as, "[i]n the case of the creature, difference from the "universal shape" is rejected finally because it violates the ideal, self-reflecting image of Frankenstein" (Pon 38). As *Frankenstein* progresses, the creature recreates the destruction or the erasure of the feminine much as Victor does in his endeavor when he creates the monster. Victor and the creature become one another (Pon 39). Pon extends this idea further by exploring the events of the creation of the female monster. The very creation of the female monster is a reiteration of Victor's attempts to create something that reflects himself. The monster requests that "my companion will be of the same nature as myself, and will be content with the same fare" (qtd. in Pon 43). Pon equates this view as being in the same vein as how creation functions in *Paradise Lost* and in Genesis (Pon 43). Pon's article provides a basis to discuss the interrelated nature of Victor and his creation. Her argument that the monster is strictly masculine due to his origin is helpful to the idea of gender construction.

Pon's article extrapolates the origin of the masculine creation as a flawed one. She sees it in other facets of Shelley's life. Both in her friends' attempts to write a ghost story and in the act of rearing children, which is usually assigned to women. Mary Shelley, her husband Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and John William Polidori all decided that they were going to write ghost stories. The only one of them who completed their story was Mary Shelley. Both Percy Shelley and Byron had little interest in raising their children. Shelley completed both her story and child rearing (Pon 37). Pon contends that this provides a stark contrast to the feminine creation presented by Shelley's *Frankenstein* and her later editing of her husband's work. Shelley did not turn away from her creations like the masculine figures in her text and she understood that creation came from the influences of others. In essence, creation cannot come from a single source or a void of others (Pon 40-41).

Victor is intentionally vague about his monster's creation. The nature of the tale of Frankenstein is a story that is being narrated and encompassed by many. At one point, Victor is telling his tale to Walton. Later, once the tale is concluded, Walton asks Victor to reveal to him how the monster was created. Victor rejects his friends request saying, "[a]re you mad, my friend?" said he; 'or whither does your senseless curiosity lead you? Would you also create for yourself and the world a demoniacal enemy? Peace, peace!

learn my miseries, and do not seek to increase your own” (Shelley 203). Victor attempts to keep Walton, and quite possibly any future readers, from making the same mistake, and he refuses to give the specifics of how to create life without a woman.

After the creature was born, he progresses quite quickly through his childhood years (Shelley 99-102). He is denied society and therefore culture by his creator and other humans. He is again outside of a traditional development or creation. His first interactions with humans are not ideal (Shelley 102). That being said, these early interactions did not influence his final monstrous murderous self. Although he is abandoned by his creator and is feared by other humans, he still manages to feel and desire love and empathy for the De Lacey's, who live in the cottage where he secretly cohabitates. The monster explains these feelings as “I felt the sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature; they were a mixture of pain and pleasure, such as I had never before experienced, either from hunger or cold, warm or food; and I withdrew from the window, unable to bear these emotions” (Shelley 104). Even though the family constitutes a source of society and culture for the monster, he finds himself outside of a typical relationship by being unable to interact with the family. His gender is ultimately determined by the consequences he experiences when he tries to commune with the De Lacey's.

The De Lacey's, if they had accepted the creature, could have been a source of a positive model of gender construction and even one that is feminist. The children, though different sexes, share the work of the household (Shelley 105). Felix and his father both treat Agatha and Safie with respect (Shelley 114). Safie's very identity counters the stereotypical views of women in the text and during this time (Shelley 120-123). In Joyce Zonana's ““They Will Prove the Truth of My Tale’: Safie's Letters as the Feminist Core of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*,” argues that there is feminist ideology found within Safie's letters. The feminist ideology is Mary Wollstonecraft's. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argues that “women have rational souls” (Zonana 171). This is evident in Shelley's use of the Arabian woman, Safie. When the creature finally attempts to make himself known to the cottagers he is greeted with violence from Felix and is driven from the cottage (Shelley 131). Again, he is scorned by people he believes could and should love him. Even though he is shunned by them, he does not kill them like he does with Victor's family.

An additional source of gender construction for the creator could be the texts that the monster finds (Shelley 124). These texts also help to reinforce a toxic model of gender and masculinity. As Pon explores the reiteration of the story of Genesis in *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *Werther*, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* can be possibly viewed as text that reiterates outdated models of gender which are possibly unhealthy ones.

Zonana also considers the reading list of both Shelley and *Frankenstein*'s monster to provide further evidence of Wollstonecraft's influence. Zonana argues that another shared text is Wollstonecraft's writings (Zonana 173). In this regard, the feminist message found in Wollstonecraft's writing is also found in Safie's letters. Zonana credits other researchers for finding Safie or Safie's mother to be symbols of

Wollstonecraft. Zonana explains that both Safie and her mother reject “Mahometanism,” which Wollstonecraft sees as an oppressive source that seeks to keep women from being viewed as rational beings (Zonana 173). Wollstonecraft also sees Milton as a propagator of this same problematic view of women. With these views in mind, Safie plays the embodiment of Wollstonecraft’s arguments (Zonana 173).

What is most influential to the creature’s gender construction is his relationship with Victor. The creator is the one who should be most able to love the monster, but instead he is the first to turn from the creature (Shelley 57). He is repulsed by his creation and even questions his obligations to his progeny (Shelley 141). The creature knows how his creator feels about him. When they meet again, the monster states that he “expected this reception” (Shelley 96). The creature knows that Victor will not respond well to him and that Victor is still disgusted by him.

Victor’s own gender construction is not an ideal model for the creature. Victor represents an embodiment of first generation Romantics. His “big personality” or nature that attracts so many to him is dangerous for the people he loves. This personality is largely applied to men of the first generation Romantics. This concept makes a platform for Victor to understand and imitate his gender as masculine. Shelley creates Victor with these characteristics to illustrate how a flawed creation of gender can have horrible consequences.

Victor’s representation is a stark contrast to the character Safie, who embodies a different understanding of gender construction. Zonana argues that Safie continues Wollstonecraft’s critique of gender construction. Zonana explains Wollstonecraft’s concept of gender construction when she states in her article:

Not only does she assert that what has been regarded as “body” is also “spirit,” but she criticizes hierarchical dualism itself, insisting that Western culture’s valuation of “spirit” over “body,” “Man” over “Nature,” “masculine” over “feminine” is a destructive philosophical commitment. In doing so, she approaches the perspective of contemporary ecofeminists. Who assert not simply that women and nature have souls, and thus have rights, but that the devaluation of the body inherently found in Western culture, is itself problematic. (Zonana 172)

Victor is an iteration of the gender separation that Wollstonecraft considers problematic. This is demonstrated throughout the events of *Frankenstein*.

Victor’s nature, and by extension his gender construction, is the cause of many of the novel’s dilemmas. It leads to the creation of the monster and to the death of his loved ones. He is unable to take accountability for his actions outside of torturing himself internally (Shelley 79, 82, 86), so much so that he allows Justine to die instead of admitting his fault publicly (Shelley 86). He is afraid of the female creature, whether this is sexually or because of the contract between the creature and himself, this illustrates another problematic facet of his gender or identity through his actions (Shelley 160). His very pursuit of knowledge that culminates in the creation of the monster is ultimately not only his downfall but the downfall of the people he loves as well (Shelley 49-55).

He is unable to protect his loved ones from this mistake. He leaves a trail of death wherever he goes. No one is safe from Victor's gender construction and therefore his actions, especially the monster who explains that he will go to his death at the end of the novel (Shelley 214-215). In more ways than one, Victor is a truly flawed man and a poor example of male gender. The creature incorporates Victor's gender construction into himself.

Rousseau's Social Contract Theory provides insight into how gender operated during Shelley's time. The Social Contract Theory is "the view that persons' moral and/or political obligations are dependent upon a contract or agreement among them to form the society in which they live" ("Social Contract Theory"). One scholar, Zoe Beenstock, argues that Rousseau is another pivotal text to Mary Shelley's writing. Beenstock explains that Rousseau believes that females are considered outside of his Social Contract Theory. She argues that this is reflected in the creature, as a representation of women, and in women who are viewed as threats to society because of their uncontrollability (Beenstock 409). The exclusion of women from Social Contract Theory and the idea that the creature is a proxy for excluded women can explain the creature's victim choices. The monster's murders are perpetrated against those outside of Rousseau's Social Contract Theory, specifically women and children, and are an attempt for the monster to assert himself as a part of Rousseau's contract. In this formulation, Victor is the only character who participates in Rousseau's concept as he is an adult man. When the monster murders his victims, he is confirming that women and children are not part of the contract and that he wields power over them just as Victor does. The murders of those related to Victor are a means to exist and actively participate in Rousseau's Social Contract and in earnest to be considered both human and male. The creature murders so that he can hold the same social standing as Victor in Social Contract Theory. The children who are excluded from the contract and murdered by the monster are William and Justine. William, even though he is male, represents this exclusion. William is considered under the care of Victor because he is a child. He is not an independent agent. Once the monster discovers that the child is related to Victor, the monster decides to kill him (Shelley 138). Justine, who is also a child under Victor's care, is killed because she is unable to view the monster as anything but monstrous and is not willing to have sex with him (Shelley 139). The creature's murders are sexually motivated and directed by who is excluded from the Social Contract Theory.

It is now relevant to return to Beenstock's discussion of Social Contract Theory and how this, in turn, affects the female creature's creation and destruction in *Frankenstein*:

This leaves women, who are not political subjects, but who Rousseau does perceive as having wills of their own, in a precarious position as possible threats to society—potentially beyond the control of society... *Frankenstein* suggests the social values that produce the monster cannot be extended to women. Yet women may nonetheless demand them, hence Victor's concern that the female creature may resist her partner's authority. (Beenstock 416-417)

As Victor undertakes the endeavor to create the female creature, he fears that she will not adhere to the contract that Victor and the monster follow. He fears the possibility that she will not submit to the creature and that their possible children will not either (Shelley 161). Victor's monsters will not only be threats to society but will also not be considered political subjects. This is a repeat of the concept that both women and children are outside of Rousseau's model. For this reason, Victor destroys the female creature which in turn leads to the destruction of Elizabeth (Shelley 163). The responses between Victor and the creature helps to construct the monster's gender. The death of both of their mates are consequences which help to police both parties' version of overly aggressive gender.

The murders of those outside of Rousseau's theory, specifically William, Justine, Elizabeth, and Henry, influence Victor's willingness to create a mate for the creature (Shelley 142). On the subject of Elizabeth's death, for the purpose of this argument, both her and Henry are considered Victor's lovers. This is not to say that Henry and Victor are romantically involved but that the composite of Elizabeth and Henry is one that the monster wishes for in the female creature. Henry is a lifelong companion of Victor who shares his interests and the burdens of life. Both of these characters symbolizes the very thing that Victor denies the creature. In this regard, all of the victims of the monster are people who belong to Victor, either through them actively choosing the relationship, like Henry, or through familial bonds which are in turn reinforced by Victor's position in Social Contract Theory. The children, William and Justine, are seen as Victor's by the creature because of Victor's position as an adult male. A piece of evidence that is particularly telling is in the fact that Victor's adult brother, Ernest, is the only one who survives (Shelley 191). He is outside of Victor's influence as he is not a child and not a woman (or lover).

The monster's interactions with Victor and his victim choice all serve as a source of Butler's gender performance. It is these actions that define the monster as masculine in terms of a toxic and outdated model of man. This model is an extremely limited version of what a man is. While the creature is considered a very articulate "man" he struggles with violence that often predates his emotional expression to others (Shelley 202). He depicts what he believes to be masculine but what is actually a twisted representation of the gender that is understood as aggressive sexuality.

Feminist theory provides new insight into Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The analyses by Zonana and Pon articulates clear proof of the existence of the feminist subtext in Shelley's work. Their work, which identifies the existence of Wollstonecraft's influence and contemplates the masculine creation of the monster, heavily influences this discussion of gender construction.

Moreover, Hoeveler's concise history of feminist theory and interpretation gives a clear progression of how *Frankenstein* came to be reinterpreted by a new school feminist of thought. Additionally, her claim that *Frankenstein* is a text that depicts societal attitudes while also showcasing an argument against them is fundamental to this paper. Shelley's depiction of the monster and his creator is in part commenting on the ill

effects of a distorted understanding of masculinity. The creature's gender construction relies heavily on his creator's gender. As the monster attempts to construct a gender for himself, he turns to violent and sexual acts that represent Butler's gender performativity. Rousseau's Social Contract Theory also provides a key to interpreting the creature's victim choice. The monster and his subsequent actions are the results of a dangerous model of gender that exemplifies the problems with equating masculine with aggression and violence.

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