Women in Frankenstein: Mary Shelley's Novel versus Kenneth Branagh's Film

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Mary Shelley used the unprecedented motif of male procreation to both acurrately describe and harshly criticize the unfavourable position of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft, her mother and also one the earliest feminist writers, Shelley depicts the inevitable negative outcomes of the strict gender division in the society. This meant that the public sphere of life was regarded as the male realm, while the private or emotional sphere of life represented the female realm. *Frankenstein* serves as the author's protest against the general concept of female inferiority as well as against her own position as an emerging female (!) writer in a male-dominated world. Additionally, the paper presents director Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* and discusses how the changes he introduced bring the novel's underlying issues to the foreground. All issues discussed in this paper prove that Shelley's *Frankenstein* is not just a work of fiction whose main themes have no connection to the real world its author lived in. Quite contrary, the purpose of this interpretation is to discover how Shelley's fictional world and its norms reflect the attitudes of the society of her time.

KEY WORDS

Mary Shelley, gender roles, male dominance, female inferiority, procreation, Kenneth Branagh

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INTRODUCTION

If asked to share the very first associations which come to their minds upon thinking of Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, very few average readers, if any at all, would think of its female characters and their contribution to the overall story. This is not particularly surprising considering the fact that, apart from its almost exclusively male narrative voice, the work of Mary Shelley generally gives a very strong impression that her female characters play an utterly insignificant role in the novel's central theme that is Victor Frankenstein's creation of his Monster and the subsequent relationship they have with one another.

Nevertheless, as James P. Davies asserts:

> It strikes many readers of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as curious if not paradoxical that the daughter of so renowned a feminist as Mary Wollstonecraft would write her first novel from the perspectives of three men -- with only minimal attention to female characters. (307)

Bearing this peculiarity in mind, those willing to pay a little bit more attention to the story and read between the lines of this apparent neglect of female representation will most certainly be pleasantly surprised to discover a truly interesting phenomenon behind the male-dominated world of *Frankenstein*. The act of reducing her female characters to "the helpless charges and pretty playthings of their husbands" (Hale 19) in fact served Mary Shelley to deliver an accurate depiction and a severe criticism of the unfavourable social position of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She also reflected the feminist ideas of her mother by showing the disastrous consequences the male dominance can inflict on the society. And even though, as Michal Smolka argues, "the reader of *Frankenstein* may have the impression that Mary Shelley had very little to say about the social position of women since the women in the novel have little to say themselves" (25), such view of the matter could not be further from the true intentions of the author.

Therefore, this paper will try to prove that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is in no way simply a depiction of women's inferiority of the time, but a complex work with a strong feminist layer repeatedly emphasizing female importance. In addition, it will make a point that the director Kenneth Branagh has not, contrary to popular belief, ruined Shelley's original idea by changing Elizabeth's character as well as her fatal destiny, but that he has rather made it more explicit.

This paper is divided into three main chapters “Women in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*”, “Women in Kenneth Branagh’s *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*” and “Film Adaptation in the Classroom: Methodological Approach”. The first chapter deals with the interpretation of the novel and consists of three subchapters.

The first one represents the “Historical and Social Context” of the novel’s publication, while the pertaining attitudes of the time toward women and Shelley’s portrayal thereof are presented in the following subchapter, “Explicit Portrayal: Subordination of Women”. The third subchapter named “Underlying Feminist Ideas: Shortcomings of Rigid Division of Sex-roles” explores the social position of females of the time as well as the true significance of Shelley’s almost entirely male-dominated narrative. This last subchapter is also divided into three smaller parts which deal with certain issues in the novel which, in the light of the feminist literary criticism, speak of the importance of females in the novel. They are called “Exclusion of Women from the Process of Reproduction”, “Mary Shelley’s Reflection in the Monster” and the “Destructive Power of Female Absence”.

The second chapter focuses on the director Kenneth Branagh’s film adaptation of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and explores his portrayal of women. The purpose of this chapter is to show that his film adaptation, even though Branagh did make certain changes with respect to Shelley’s novel, reinforces Shelley’s original ideas on the dangers of male dominance and female inferiority.

The third chapter represents a methodological approach to the comparative interpretation of Shelley’s novel and Branagh’s film, in the sense that it offers several possibilities on how to approach this subject in the classroom environment.

2. WOMEN IN MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*

2.1. Historical and Social Context

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* or her "hideous progeny", as she referred to the novel herself, was first published in 1818. The process of writing the novel and its first as well as later publications (the second version of Frankenstein was published in 1823, followed by another revised version in 1831) (Pabst-Kastner), came at the time when the world changing effects of the French Revolution and the First Industrial Revolution were still as strong as ever. Numerous social, political, economic, but above all scientific advancements took place in that period whose extensive elaboration in *Frankenstein* shows that Mary Shelley was very well acquainted with their existence: "Her use of science in the book directly relates to the many discoveries of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, specifically the discovery of the nature of electricity" (Storment). Additionally, in the light of the Enlightenment and its rational basis, men were now able to reach previously unfathomable knowledge on human body and the way it functions, as well as do things which had earlier been possible only in their imagination. And it is exactly this scientific development, together with the moral questions hovering over all the innovations, that presents the most fascinating and frequently explored aspects of Shelley's work to this day.

However, according to its original purpose, this paper will primarily focus on the fact that, in spite of the giant leaps of progress in a variety of its aspects, the society to which Mary Shelley and her *Frankenstein* belonged was still a time of the severe social inequality between men and women both in the world of literature and life in general. This was also something that many literary authors worked hard to oppose. Maybe the easiest way to pinpoint the core social problem of the period is to use the exact words of John Stuart Mill, one of the most influential British philosophers of the nineteenth century and a prominent fighter for the individual freedom, testifying that "the present system (...) entirely subordinates the weaker sex to the stronger" (7). In other words, he explains how women's rights and the idea of a woman as an independent human being were not just being looked down on at the time, but regarded with deep contempt.

Considering that the *Subjection of Women* (1869), his most prominent work on the inferior position of women in the society featuring this statement, was published fifty one years after the first publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, it can easily be concluded that the issues Mill touches upon in his essay were undoubtedly present in her time as well. Clearly,

Shelley had enough trouble trying to express herself in regard to her inferior position as a woman in such prejudiced society, let alone trying to achieve an acclaimed status as a (female) writer. As Louise Othello Knudsen explains: “Women were not expected to write, and it was common belief that they did not even possess the talent of *creating* a text” (73). Ironically, Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* during the Romantic period, the major literary features of which were creativity and the originality of authorship. Also, her already existing struggles at the beginning of her career as a female writer were exacerbated by the fact that it was the two most renowned Romantic writers who prompted her to write a horror story in the first place; her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord George Gordon Byron.

Additionally, while as an extremely creative work of fiction produced by a female writer *Frankenstein* represented an issue of its own kind, its underlying subversive messages directed against male-dominated society of Shelley’s time, which will be thoroughly discussed later in the text, made it even more problematic for the period the book was written in. While keeping in mind that she, though implicitly, in fact harshly criticised the male-biased society she lived in, it is not particularly difficult to understand the reasons for which Shelley decided to first publish her *Frankenstein* without claiming her authorship, since many male authors with the same intentions were criticised. Hence, John Stuart Mill openly informs his readers how he found himself in a very hard position while arguing against the injustice of female inferiority to men since this concept represented “an almost universal opinion” and how those individuals who have the audacity to challenge it “must be very fortunate well as unusually capable if they obtain a hearing at all” (4). But it was exactly this feminist subtext that has helped *Frankenstein* remain one of the most intricate, but interesting texts for the feminist interpretation up until today.

2.2. Explicit Portrayal: Subordination of Women

The task of this chapter will be both description of female characters in Shelley's novel as they were portrayed by the author and the analysis of the correspondence between every character's position of a depraved female part of the aristocratic society of their time and all the hardships of the real lives of the women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The four main characters which will be discussed in terms of female subjugation are Margaret Walton, Elizabeth Lavenza, Justine Moritz and Caroline Beaufort.

To begin with, one should first take a closer look at Mrs Margaret Saville, the female character which chronologically "appears" first in the book. This deliberate use of quotes serves to highlight a very important feature through which Mary Shelley establishes the male dominance in the novel. That is "the completely male-dominated narrative frame of Shelley's novel" (Hale 13) which functions as "a metaphor for [men's] commanding power over [women's] lives" (Bennett and Curran 2). Therefore, it can be concluded that Margaret's passive and listening nature, which at first seems only a natural consequence of her correspondence with her brother since she is obviously not accompanying him on his expedition to the North Pole, actually sets a pattern for the overall presentation of women in the novel. In other words, this seemingly minor feature of conveying Margaret's words and attitudes, as well as blatantly disregarding them, through her brother is in truth an extremely powerful device used to "push [all female characters in *Frankenstein*] to the perimeter, relegating them to passively serving as an audience for male stories" (Davies 308). Knudsen will even go that far as to say that Margaret's character is only "a tool of communication" (13).

The above mentioned *pushing* women away takes place both literally and symbolically. Literally, because the stories of all women that the reader learns of during the course of the book are told by men. The first narrator is Robert Walton, followed by Victor Frankenstein and his Monster. On the other hand, the symbolical *pushing away* of women manifests itself in the following way: the women are not allowed to "speak" as well as have their opinions seriously taken into consideration no matter which subject they are trying to influence the men on. Jessica Hale simply describes this social injustice as women being "pretty playthings of their husbands" (19), brother in this case, meaning that women were not allowed to *pry* into men's affairs.

Therefore, the words of Walton's sister, who "had regarded [her brother's expedition] with such evil forebodings" (Shelley 2) and made her thoughts clear to him, have obviously not managed to detract him from his intention. In addition, Walton explicitly shows his condescension towards Margaret and her opinions by asking her to write to him "by every

opportunity (...) to support [his] spirits" (12-13) as well as by lamenting the lack of a male friend with whom he could share his knowledge and ambition.

This wish for a male friend that Walton discloses to his sister is another blatant example of female subordination which mirrors that of Shelley's time; Walton cannot find an equal with whom he would share his great knowledge in his sister nor in any other female because Margaret, as a woman, never had the chance to learn the things he did since "science and education was intended for men only[1], whereas childbirth, childcare, and domestic life in general was reserved for the women" (Knudsen 15). Indeed, in one of his last letters, Walton informs the readers that is at home Margaret with "a husband, and lovely children" (Shelley 394).

This belief, which was strongly embedded into the society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, supports the earlier suggestion that Margaret's character is a pathway to understanding the position of the rest of Shelley's female characters. Every conclusion that the readers can draw from the book about her position in her own family and the rest of the society applies to every other female character in the novel. Elizabeth's character, because of her aristocratic background and the wealthy family she lives in, may give out the impression of a somewhat more prominent character, but her helplessness in relation to men is absolutely equal to the one of Justine Moritz who is a servant at the Frankenstein's house. There is absolutely no difference between the female characters regarding this attitude that the woman should patiently wait at home doing things which Wollstonecraft refers to as "useless" or even "ridiculous" (9) to fill her day while the man, whether it be a husband, father or a brother, could take on any task he wishes to do. John Stuart Mill explains the roots of such circumstances in the following way:

> All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. (28)

The next female character to be discussed – Elizabeth Lavenza Frankenstein - represents a perfect example of an affectionate woman who has from birth been constantly encouraged to

[1] Another argument which testifies in favour of such unjust approach to women is that each and every professor that Victor Frankenstein encounters in Ingolstadt is a man.

suppress her own needs and desires in order to subject herself completely to a man and everyone else in need of her care. Arguably, she takes place as the most subdued female character in the novel because her subjection comes both from the outside influences, as well as from her inner, deeply rooted attitude that a woman should be always and inexcusably submissive.

The first instance of Elizabeth's subjection by others can be noted from the very beginning of the novel. The readers are informed that Elizabeth is the daughter of Alphonse Frankenstein's sister who had married an Italian gentleman and later died, leaving Elizabeth to her father's care. However, her father soon decided to marry another woman and send Elizabeth off to the Frankensteins, "commodifying the child much as one might in a business negotiation" (Bennett and Curran 2). In other words, Elizabeth's father treated her like an object which needed to be taken care of after the death of his wife.

Similarly, just before she comes to live with the Frankensteins, Victor's mother Caroline will happily announce: "I have a pretty present for my Victor – tomorrow you shall have it" (Shelley 18), as if Elizabeth were a possession. This quote bears another important aspect of the female subjection; coming from a woman, it only serves to show the devastating consequences of such view of women from a female perspective. Victor's mother does not protest against her position because the inferiority is embedded in her mindset to that extent that she even acts towards other females in the same way, thus referring to Elizabeth as an object at the disposal of her future husband. Hence Bennett and Curran's remark about Caroline being "as much a victim of the dominant power system as its proponent" (5). Moreover, it was also Caroline who decided that Elizabeth should marry Victor, "a design which [Elizabeth] never found reason to repent" (38) and a true characteristic of the patriarchal society of Shelley's time.

Next, the relationship between Caroline and Elizabeth further emphasises the power of affection which is considered exclusively female area of expertise. Early in the book, Elizabeth catches the scarlet fever and because Caroline cannot wait any longer to see and take care of Elizabeth, she goes to her "long before the danger of infection was past" (51), becomes ill herself and dies shortly after as a result. This sacrifice that a woman is more than willing to do for another person represents the female ideal of selflessness, a characteristic that none of the male characters in this novel possess. Likewise, the same kind of selflessness can be seen in Elizabeth's behaviour following the death of Caroline:

> Since the death of her aunt, [Elizabeth's] mind had acquired new firmness and vigour. She determined to fulfil her duties with the greatest exactness; and she felt that that most imperious duty, of rendering her uncle and cousins happy, had

> devolved upon her. She consoled me, amused her uncle, instructed my brothers; and I never beheld her so enchanting as at this time, when she was continually endeavouring to contribute to the happiness of others, entirely forgetful of herself. (54)

The next character who continues to exercise control over Elizabeth is Victor Frankenstein, her fiancé and husband for the shortest period of time before the Monster kills Elizabeth in her wedding chamber. In relation to Victor, Shelley limits Elizabeth's character so severely that she does nothing else throughout the novel but write to him, wait for him, worry about his health and safety, and hope that one day he will be so kind as to respond to one of her numerous letters. She never doubts Victor's intentions and actions nor does she even contradict him concerning anything, but repeats over and over to him: "I would sacrifice my life to your peace" (152). One of the strongest examples of Elizabeth's inferiority to Victor is the letter in which she begs him to confess if he has found another love interest. And not only that, Elizabeth simultaneously expresses her fear that her request might "give [Victor] pain" (345) if that were true, therefore she encourages him to take as much time as he needs in order to reply.

On the other hand, almost every Victor's reflection on Elizabeth teems with an obvious lack of respect for her as an equal human being. Consequently, in one of his first references to Elizabeth, Victor will describe his feelings for her in this way: "I loved to tend on her, as I should on a favourite animal" (39). This may seem as a careless remark, but it actually reveals men's demeaning attitude toward women. His opinion of Elizabeth's view of the world also faithfully reflects the one that Mary Shelley's contemporaries had for women of that time:

> 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. (39)

As Tómasson notices, "it appears that [Victor] does not regard the education of women as something that should concern him greatly" (20). However, it is important to note that this is not just Victor's egotism or chauvinism, but the attitude of the whole society toward women. Victor thinks of Elizabeth in such way because they were both following their pre-set roles in the society from the early age; "her education [was] limited to reading poetry and admiring nature on her own while Frankenstein [attended] a local school" (Bennett and Curran 4). In a similar

manner, Victor's father reminds Elizabeth of her "*proper* and *natural* place in private familial and public extrafamilial interaction" (Behrendt 71) by patronizingly rejecting her proposal concerning the future profession of Victor's younger brother Ernest. When she reasonably explains that it would be much more suitable for Ernest to become a farmer (whereas his father wants him to be a lawyer) due to his love of nature and fresh air, Alphonse smiles and says "that [she] ought to be an advocate [her]self" (Shelley 93) putting an end to their discussion. Therefore, the pervasive prejudiced attitude according to which women were wholeheartedly encouraged to interest themselves in *trivial* things (such as reading poetry and dancing), while the knowledge and participation in the "actual world" were reserved just for men can be seen here once again. According to Wollstonecraft's explanation, men of that time were prone to "considering females rather as women than human creatures" (6), based on the invalid presupposition that the female power of reasoning is weaker than that of a men. As a consequence, women were being deliberately and systematically cut off from every sphere of life except for the domestic one.

Additionally, Wollstonecraft's claim that marriage is "the only way women can rise in the world" (9) testifies of a slightly better position which women could obtain if they became a lawful wife. When it comes to Elizabeth, this view is reinforced through the words of Victor who refuses to tell her about the Monster and what he actually did during his stay in Ingolstadt before they get married. He says to Elizabeth: "I will confide this tale of misery and terror to you the day after our marriage shall take place; for, my sweet cousin, there must be perfect confidence between us" (145), clearly stating that he still does not trust her enough to share his troubles with her in spite of her unrelenting devotion. Mary Shelley uses this situation to support her mother's claim by showing just how deeply prejudiced the society of their time was. Although Victor is blatantly putting Elizabeth's life at a great risk by not telling her about the Monster and his killer intentions, he persists in this stubborn belief that women should not be allowed to engage in men's affairs under any circumstances, let alone if they are not married.

The last and the most important instance of Victor Frankenstein's domination over Elizabeth's life is actually the way her life ends. It is Victor's selfishness, masked under the pretence of thinking about the greater good by refusing to create a female companion for the Monster[2], that causes Elizabeth's tragic demise in the hands of Frankenstein's Monster. When he threatens Victor that he will be with him "on [his] wedding night" (304), Victor immediately

[2] Victor fears the female monster "might become ten thousand times more malignant that her mate and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness" (Shelley 299) and thus refuses to bring her to life.

jumps to the conclusion that it is his life that is in danger, never stopping to think twice and considering that the Monster might actually be planning to kill Elizabeth.

Another female character, apart from Victor Frankenstein's fiancée, shares the same kind of subjection and helplessness to men which will eventually seal her fate. The character in question is Justine Moritz, a servant at the Frankenstein's house and one more representation of the ideal female; "pretty, domesticated, virtuous, passive and devoted to others" (Knudsen 53). Throughout the book she exhibits her gentle and caring nature: she first suffers a great deal when her beloved mistress Caroline contracts the scarlet fever and dies because of it, later she compassionately listens and supports Elizabeth during Victor's stay in Ingolstadt when he fails to answer Elizabeth's letters, and lastly, she worries about Victor's little brother William "like a most affectionate mother" (Shelley 134).

Even though her whole life perfectly fits the stereotyped role of a submissive woman, this last event puts the strongest emphasis on the complete lack of power that women have over their own lives. In the first place, little William is killed by the Monster, a male character who was created by another man, Victor Frankenstein. Secondly, the Monster deliberately frames Justine for the crime he committed by putting a locket in her pocket while she was sleeping[3] (distressed after her search for the boy!). And finally, although Victor knows for sure that it was the Monster who killed his brother and not Justine, not only does he do absolutely nothing to stand up for her innocence, but he also considers himself more affected by these unjust accusations than Justine: "The tortures of the accused did not equal mine; she was sustained by innocence, but the fangs of remorse tore my bosom, and would not forego their hold" (135).

And although this statement of Victor's might seem ironic and unbelievably selfish, it is in fact Justine's intrinsic self-denial characteristic of females that more strongly stresses the deleterious impact of patriarchal education of Shelley's time. Justine will declare that: "It removes more than half my misfortune; and I feel as if I could die in peace, now that my innocence is acknowledged by you, dear lady, and your cousin" (141). Hence, it is not the imminent loss of her life that troubles Justine, but the question of loyalty to her master and mistress, proving how women were not taught to fight for themselves at all. Her helplessness to save herself from the false accusations and execution as well as Elizabeth's futile attempt to testify about Justine's good character once again speak in favour of the female subjection.

[3] At the time of his death, William carried a locket containing his mother's picture which was later found on Justine and used against her in the court.

Last but definitely not the least female character is Caroline Beaufort, Victor Frankenstein's mother and Elizabeth Lavenza's aunt, who has already been mentioned in connection to Elizabeth's inferior position. Though, she exhibits some additional features of female subjection which are worthy of further discussion.

To start with, upon mentioning Caroline for the first time Mary Shelley explains how Caroline came to be the wife of Alphonse Frankenstein. "[Victor's father] passed his younger days perpetually occupied by the affairs of his country" and it was not until his late years that he decided to get married with a great wish of "bestowing on the state sons who might carry his virtues and his name down to posterity" (Shelley 33). Here, apart from the reinforcement of the idea that is only natural for men to be educated and devote the majority of their time to business, the author provides further evidence of social inequality between men and women. The problem in question is the generally accepted view of women as objects primarily used for giving birth to children, and male children at that.

In addition, the author uses Caroline's character to present how the society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries looked on women who to some extent differed from the ideal female fully dependent on men. Shelley does so through a short account of Caroline's life before she got married to Alphonse Frankenstein and had his children. So, Caroline's father was a good friend of Mr Frankenstein's who had lost all his wealth due to some unfortunate circumstances. He also became very ill during this time and was not able to take care of his daughter which, according to the ingrained belief of the time, put Caroline in great trouble because she did not have a male figure who would protect and procure for her. Only, Caroline supported herself as well as her father with "plain work; she plaited straw; and by various means contrived to earn a pittance scarcely sufficient to support life". This boldness of Caroline's character to "support her[self] in her adversity" (Shelley 35) would nowadays probably be regarded as a natural course of action in such situation, but since Victor describes his mother as "a mind of an uncommon mould" (35) in relation to it, Mary Shelley obviously indicated to her readers that this certainly was not the case in her time.

Nevertheless, despite her momentary courage, the death of her father and the strong social conventions against female independency disabled Caroline to escape from her pre-assigned role of a damsel in distress. That is why she saw Alphonse "like a protecting spirit" and "committed herself to his care" (36). Further, by marrying Mr Frankenstein and becoming a mother, she fulfilled her role and embodied "the ideal of the proper lady, devoted to her family at the cost of own identity and aspirations" (Knudsen 11). Even Victor confirms that the relations in his family took the expected turn: "My father directed our studies, and my mother partook of

our enjoyments" (Shelley 49), meaning that it was Victor's father who took care of the family's *serious* matters, while the mother was responsible for the trivial, domestic things.

In the end, Mary Shelley's portrayal of the discussed female characters leads to the conclusion that women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suffered a great deal of injustice regarding their position in the society since they were excluded from every sphere of life except for the private one (emotional, that is). Generally, they were being outrightly denied the right to be educated like men and repeatedly encouraged to be "securely fixed in domestic realm, performing their duties as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters without any complaint of the discontent or inequalities that shape their lives" (Smolka 25).

2.3. Underlying Feminist Ideas in *Frankenstein*: Shortcomings of the Rigid Division of Sex-roles

As it has already been established, Mary Shelley's four female characters discussed in the previous chapter faithfully mirror the inferior position of the eighteenth and nineteenth century women. They only seem to be the objects at men's disposal; it is not only their lives that men control to the utmost, but men very often play a key role in their deaths as well (as seen in Elizabeth and Justine's case). Considering the historical and social circumstances of that time, Shelley's minimal attention to her female characters would not be as curios, as Davies puts it (307), if it were not for one interesting fact from Shelley's biography.

Incidentally, she was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of one of the most influential feminist text - *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1972) - and "the first woman to present her distress and dissatisfaction openly" (Vycpálková 9). Critics who did not possess the knowledge of this piece of information or have simply ignored it, were "irritated" by "such an insipid lot" (Youngquist 349) of women in *Frankenstein* and cast them off as unworthy of attention and further study. Nevertheless, as suggested in the introductory part of this paper, there lies the true magic of the novel and, above all, the significance of Mary Shelley's contribution to the world of literature through *Frankenstein*. Accordingly, those who recognized the relevance of Shelley's family background and thus approached the research of *Frankenstein* have proved its female characters to be the exact opposite. As a result of seeing beyond the exhibited social norms they have discovered that "a critique of these oppressive circumstances runs throughout [Shelley's] narrative" (344). In like manner, Hale claims that Shelley's "completely gendered representation of weak women in need of male protection and careless men undone by unbridled ambition" for which "the binaries of public and private, male and female, presented in the novel demand to be read as a critique of the binaries themselves" (12). Therefore, one can conclude that Shelley did not write about submissive women typical of her time just because it was a Romantic tradition; she did it with the purpose of criticising each exhibited aspect of social injustice toward women.

Obviously, the criticism in her *Frankenstein* was not nearly as straightforward as that of her mother, but Anne K. Mellor argues that "Shelley, doubtless inspired by her mother's [work], specifically portrays the consequences of a social construction of gender which values men over women" ("Usurping the Female" 116). In connection to Shelley's more subtle criticism of the female inferiority, Robin Roberts describes *Frankenstein* as "Shelley's codedly female novel" while simultaneously explaining: "In calling the novel 'codedly female', I refer to the process by

which an author forced by cultural, literary, or personal constraints, uses a male character as a cover for a (...) female dilemma (17)". Kató defines this dilemma by arguing that Shelley's critique of social circumstances of the time may also be interpreted as the author's protest against her own social position as a woman, that is the "anxieties connected to becom[ing] a woman writer" (14) in a male-dominated literary world.

Apart from providing a partial explanation as to why did Mary Shelley deliberately chose to present her novel through a male-dominated narrative, this simultaneously pinpoints at the core problem of the society in the novel and in general. As Knudsen explains:

> That the women are not allowed a voice in the story is a direct parallel to the real world, where the male sex was authorised to speak and women were not. (...) Her feministic critique can therefore be seen as a non-verbal critique since it is the women's *lack* of voice that is essential. (...) Literary recognition was measured by male authors' standards, and perhaps, therefore, did Mary Shelley choose to undertake a male oriented narration and use male generated images of women. (57, 73)

Similarly, Layla Earnest asserts how Shelley, instead of "invent[ing] a definable female voice (...) critiques paternal literary history by finding gaps and flaws in its masculine representations of femininity" (22-23). This further explains why Mary Shelley opted for such an unconventional way of conveying her attitudes and feelings toward the issue, considering that Wollstonecraft's open critique towards the existing social norms and inferiority of women was harshly criticised itself many years after its publication. The main point, however, of both Wollstonecraft's and Shelley's criticism is what Mellor defines as the "rigid division of sex-roles: the man inhabits the public sphere, the woman is relegated to the private or domestic sphere" (115). Such organization meant that men were educated in order to pursue their ambitions and provide for the family, while women were denied the proper education and therefore confined to home and menial tasks, as seen in the previous chapter.

In her work, Wollstonecraft also provides an explanation as to what caused this division. She claims that it stems from the distortion of the general fact that men are physically stronger than women. Yet, as if that were not enough, she explains how men "tend to sink [women] even lower" (8) by falsely attributing them with a weaker reasoning power, and thus denying them the equal status in the society. Although Wollstonecraft admits that women will by nature always have a weaker physique in comparison to men, she strongly negates the idea that women's minds

are inherently weaker then men's. On the contrary, Wollstonecraft assures that it is "the insufficient education of women [that] makes mere toys of them and thus degrades them" as well as "instructs that education on household matters and instructions on pleasing a husband makes women of weak mind" (Vycpálková 38). In like manner Shelley, inspired by her mother, "explores how perceived physical differences between men and women have been wrongly expanded into the central structuring principle for society" (Bugg 3). As seen in the explicit portrayal of Margaret, Elizabeth, Caroline and Justine, her female characters, deprived of any formal education and thus entirely dependent on men, patiently fulfil their household duties and selflessly strive to keep everyone around them happy.

According to Wollstonecraft, though, the blame cannot entirely be put on men; she likewise reproves all women who are satisfied with such disposition of being "in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone" (8). To illustrate this kind of male behaviour, which harmed women far more than protected them, here is a quote from *Frankenstein* in which Victor explains to the readers how his father Alphonse treated his wife Caroline Beaufort. As Hale notices, "Caroline is portrayed as a plant capable of surviving only under the careful cultivation of her surrogate caretaker" (12):

> Everything was made to yield to her wishes and her convenience. He strove to shelter her, as a fair exotic is sheltered by the gardener, from every rougher wind, and to surround her with all that could tend to excite pleasurable emotion in her soft and benevolent mind" (Shelley 62).

The assertion that such male conduct of keeping women *in the dark* brought them more harm than good finds its proof in Elizabeth and Justine's case as well, considering their deaths could have perhaps been avoided if Frankenstein told them about his creation of the Monster. Now, considering the fact that Shelley's Margaret, Elizabeth, Justine and Caroline represent the exact type of women that Wollstonecraft harshly rebukes, one might ask the following question: how is *Frankenstein* exactly a critique of the subjection of women?

In truth, there are two major ways in which Shelley's novel criticises the existing social norms by adopting her mother's attitude that the strict division of male (public or rational) and female (private or emotional) roles is severely detrimental to the society on the whole. To begin with, the strongest point of many critics who endorse this view is the fact that those female characters with which Shelley reinforces the female position within the society of her time (with the exception of Margaret) are eventually destroyed, that is dead. And this destruction is,

according to Smolka, directly due to “their obedience to the role prescribed for them by the male patriarchal society which deprives them of any ability to save themselves” (26). Caroline, who “incarnates a patriarchal ideal of female devotion and self-sacrifice” (“Usurping the Female” 116), dies as a direct result of her affectionate nature and the learned lack of reasoning skills, that is the impatience to care for the sick Elizabeth. Similarly, Elizabeth who “dutifully fulfils the traditional expectations of a girl in her circle and her era” (Bennett and Curran 4) “is also turned into an abject (...) corpse by the end of the novel” (Frampton 27). And there is also the likewise selfless and obedient Justine Moritz whose “individual predicament serves to depict the societal condition” (Bennett and Curran 6).

In the eyes of many literary critics, Justine’s unjust conviction, together with her death, represents perhaps the most obvious instance of Shelley’s “condemnation of the judicial system and the predicament of women in the society”, since “[Justine] Moritz and [Elizabeth] Lavenza, as women, do not possess the credibility to convince the jury of Moritz's innocence” (6). Likewise, Mellor insists that the incident (as well as Elizabeth’s subsequent testimony in favour of Justine’s innocence) represents Mary Shelley’s most fervent attack on the injustice of patriarchal political systems based on the separation of feminine affections and compassion from the public realm which has caused much social evil. She further supports her claim with the following premise: “Had Elizabeth Lavenza's plea for mercy for Justine, based on her intuitively correct knowledge of Justine's character, been heeded, Justine would not have been wrongly murdered by the courts” (“Usurping the Female” 117). Bennett and Curran even go to that extent as to claim that Elizabeth’s testimony:

> [F]unctions as an overt expression of Mary Shelley's political agenda. When Lavenza 'comes out' to defend the innocent Justine Moritz, she indicts both the prevailing judicial system as well as her own education, which had failed to prepare her for the world as it was. (6)

Paul Youngquist also shares the idea that *Frankenstein* served Mary Shelley to express her attitude that “the British culture (...) is primarily guilty of alienating its female members from their human potential, reducing their identity entirely to sex, which men define and control” (340). One might add - in life, like in death.

Youngquist’s assertion that it is her own, British culture that Mary Shelley criticizes in *Frankenstein* seems particularly interesting and even dubious since her protagonist was a Genovese. However, there are two characters in the book which confirm that Shelley’s critique

was not general, but a specific one. The first character is the young Russian lady or the former love interest of a man whom Robert Walton refers to as "the master of the ship" (Shelley), also a Russian. In his letter to Margaret, Walton explains how the lady's father promised her hand to the master, but the lady pleaded him not to marry her because she was in love with someone else. Being "a noble fellow" (13) that he is, the master did not only consent to the lady's wishes, but he also convinced her father to let her marry the man she truly loved. The next character is Safie, the Arabian woman in love with Felix De Lacey. Although here Shelley touches upon the even stronger inferiority of women in the Muslim society, she creates a unique female character in *Frankenstein* through Safie: "an independent, strong, passionate, and courageous woman" (Knudsen 55) who manages to run away from her father and live a happy life with the De Laceys, unlike any of the Frankenstein women.

The De Lacey family is additionally important when speaking of yet another aspect of Shelley's criticism that mirrors the ideas Wollstonecraft expressed in her *Vindication*. According to some, *Frankenstein* does not only criticise the exclusion of women from the public sphere of life, but it also exhibits the dangers of men's intentional detachment from the private or emotional realm. In such manner, Theresa M. Girard speaks about the devastating effects that men and their ambitions can have on civilizations and world peace for generations: "Had they only taken the time to pursue family interests and been at peace, internally, civilizations would not have fallen and the world would be an entirely different place" (7). Victor Frankenstein is a perfect example of such man whose downfall is caused by this separation of masculine work from the domestic affection. In other words, "[b]ecause Frankenstein cannot work and love at the same time, he fails to feel empathy for the creature he is constructing" ("Usurping the Female" 116). In return, Frankenstein's lack of affection toward the Monster ends up being the main cause of his revenge, since all the Monster wanted was to be loved and cared for.

On the other hand, Mellor sees the De Lacey family as "an alternative social organization in the novel" with which Mary Shelley "underlines the mutual deprivation inherent in a family and social structure based on rigid and hierarchical gender-divisions" (117). Therefore, Agatha, despite her kindness and beauty equal to the one of the rest of the female characters, shares the conventionally male sphere of life (working in the field and providing for the family) as well as the female (caring for the family) one with her brother Felix and their old blind father. In addition, their family peace is not interrupted when Felix's "sweet Arabian" (Shelley 200) Safie arrives. On the contrary, they become even happier because both women and men work together to support the family and share their troubles, both existential and emotional.

In this way, Shelley's portrayal of their harmonious community perfectly corresponds with the thesis of John Stuart Mill's *Subjection of Women*:

> That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (4)

Thus, Mill argues that it is impossible for the society to prosper if there is to be a subjection of any kind. Likewise, Wollstonecraft argues that if marriage were more like a friendship of two equal partners, they would be better parents to their children and would contribute the society on the whole. Even though the reader might get the impression that Victor's family seems idyllic, especially when he describes his early childhood, it is crucial to stress that it is Victor's viewpoint that provides such description. However, reading between the lines as well as Elizabeth's letters[4] render a different, more realistic picture of the family relations. Likewise, Victor declares his love for Elizabeth on multiple occasions, but his actions show that his ambitions and his work were much more precious to him than his affection toward Elizabeth.

Therefore, this distinction that exists between the Frankensteins and the De Laceys is the key element which determined the faith its members. The Frankensteins reinforce the existing social model in which a woman (wife or daughter) is completely subjected to a man and are therefore destroyed, while the De Laceys live in harmony because their family is based on equality and mutual friendship.

The next three subchapters are going to provide, with the help of the feminist literary criticism, a deeper analysis of specific issues regarding the strict gender dichotomy and its accompanying subjection of women. Just like any other type of literary criticism, it assumes that literary works reflect the reality of the time they were written in. Yet, feminist literary critics put a special emphasis on the position of women and tend to strive for their awareness. Also, feminist interpretations often focus on the very author and try to connect his or her personal experience and anxieties with the literary worlds they create. In the case of *Frankenstein*, such approach truly is fruitful since "Mary Shelley's own life was a source of inspiration for her novel

[4] Such as the one in which Elizabeth informs Victor how his father (and her uncle) ironically rejected her suggestion regarding the future profession of Victor's little brother Ernest.

[as it] was her contemporary society and its treatment of women" (Knudsen 11). However, it is important to note that all these issues cannot be interpreted in isolation because they share a common origin nor can they be fully understood one without the other. Still, one can name three major issues in Shelley's *Frankenstein* which strongly reflect the existing social norms of her time and her personal (feminine) experience regarding them.

2.3.1. Exclusion of Women from the Process of Reproduction

On the outside, the exclusion of women from the process of reproduction seems to most harshly deprive women of their natural role in the society. At the same time, however, it represents the most convincing argument of both Wollstonecraft and Shelley's assertion that the strict gender division is detrimental not only to women, but also to the society in general.

From the feminist point of view, according to Mellor, the simplest way of specifying the theme of Shelley's *Frankenstein* is to say that it deals with "what happens when a man tries to have a baby without a woman" ("Making a Monster" 40). Likewise, the easiest way of interpreting it as a text which stands in favour of the feminist philosophy is the obvious conclusion that Victor Frankenstein's story ends with a severely tragic result exactly because he tried to have a baby without a woman. Men's tendency to "sink [women] even lower" (8) on the social ladder, as Wollstonecraft says, comes to life now more than ever through Frankenstein's attempt to eliminate the "gift of creation" (Knudsen 16), women's only advantage over men. Consequently, its unsuccessful result indicates that Mary Shelley did not advocate against the male social dominance simply on the grounds of its negative impact on the lives of women. What she truly wanted to show was that such social organization bore extremely negative repercussions for men as well.

Indeed, many critics share this idea. To illustrate, Earnest states the following: "By creating an intense collapse of boundaries [in the form of the Monster's birth], Shelley critiques the patriarchal insistence on a strictly divided gender dichotomy" (6) and demonstrates "the disastrous effects of defining the domestic and extrafamilial spheres as mutually exclusive" (Hale 12). The central idea of Victor's wish to exercise the superiority over women by usurping their most natural function is that the result of such "unnatural act of procreation in which woman has become unnecessary" (Rohrmoser) "could only be a monster" ("A Feminist Critique of Science" 299). Likewise, Michal Smolka agrees on the real cause of the tragic destiny of Frankenstein and everyone around him as well as Shelley's accompanying message:

> Along the narration of Frankenstein, there is a succession of tragic incidents that are the outgrowth of malfunctioning relationships between family members and most importantly between men and women (or husband and wife). The male vanity is an element that corrupts the principles of a functioning family by considering 'himself' as superior to the female element. Defying equal mutual partnership, the male ego locks himself out of the basics of human society – the family. And this is the core of Mary Shelley's message – the counterproductivity of such a behaviour since the man has situated himself outside the sphere of family intimacy and offspring breeding. (31)

Therefore, beside the wrongful act of trying to usurp a distinctly female feature, the idea is that Victor Frankenstein failed because he could not provide his Monster with adequate care since "the monster's cruel behaviour could have been prevented by parental love and tenderness" (Kató 12). And the main reason for which Frankenstein was not able to feel affection toward his Monster is because the rigid division of male (rational) and female (emotional) sphere of life deprived Frankenstein of "the mothering and nurturance [a child] requires" ("Making a Monster" 300), exclusively connected to the female gender at the time.

The above mentioned male vanity and egotism on the expense of females can explicitly be seen in Victor's following words: "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve their" (Shelley 81). This goes further to show the differences established between the male and female gender. The act of giving birth as well as the subsequent selflessness and profound affection toward the children were considered the most important female features at the time. Granted, since this was considered a natural state of affairs, women received no praise for their trials of childbirth and child-rearing nor for their selflessness. On the other hand, Victor who indeed worked hard "engag[ing his] heart and soul" (73) to create his Monster, but never knew the real pains of labour (or the subsequent affection, for that matter), considers himself worthy of eternal praise and gratitude.

Feminist literary criticism also provides an explanation as to why Victor Frankenstein wishes to usurp the female reproductive role in the first place. Essentially, they claim that the origin of his actions represents the same source of the overall men's wish to dominance women, and that is the fear of female sexuality. According to Smolka, the overall men's attitude to women, which "assumed that any effective liberation of women's position in society would

weaken the patriarchal constitution", finds its source in men's "unconscious horror of female sexuality". He further adds that "[t]he power of human reproduction it enables poses a threat to the established patriarchal network which then resorts to science and laws to manipulate, control and oppress women" (7). Indeed, Victor Frankenstein excluded women from the process of reproduction with the help of science. Mellor further advances the theory by claiming that:

> A woman who is sexually liberated, free to choose her own life, her own sexual partner (by force, if necessary), and to propagate at will can appear only monstrously ugly to Victor Frankenstein, for she defies that sexist aesthetic that insists that women be small, delicate, modest, passive, and sexually pleasing -- but available only to their lawful husbands. (120)

This also explains the reasons for which Victor destroys the female monster before she even comes to life. He fears that "she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness" (Shelley 299), but above all Frankenstein is most terrified of "her potential to become a mother" (Earnest 26). Victor's assumptions embody the attitude of men of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who feared women who would "not retreat to passive, silent existence on the margins of human experience" (Behrendt 79), as they were taught from the early age. Moreover, "[t]he rejection to create a female companion for the Creature signals the suppression of the realm of emotions, the sphere from which the female sexual power grows" (Smolka 26).

Finally, in connection to the arguments that *Frankenstein* served Shelley to express her anxiety of being a female writer in a male-dominated world, it is also possible to say that this was her way of showing how ridiculous and *unnatural* society's degrading attitude toward women was. "The male scientist who created without a female was not only a warning against the rapidly developing science but also bespoke of an increasing marginalization of women in society and in literature" (Knudsen 10). In this way, Victor Frankenstein's deliberate exclusion of female in an uncommon attempt to have a baby can be compared to both real and literary world dominated by men, who are usurping women's inherent right of *procreation*. Thus, Frankenstein's "unnatural process of creation: a man assuming the maternal role of biological life-giver mirrors Shelley's socially constructed sense that she behaved unnaturally in assuming the role of [a female] artistic creator" (Parker).

2.3.2. Mary Shelley's Reflection in the Monster

The previous chapter makes it obvious that Mary Shelley protested against the neglect of the right of women to be a rightful part of the society, while simultaneously lamenting her inferiority in the world of literature as a female writer. However, the critics provide an interesting view of the way the author actually articulated her criticism against the existing female subjugation. Even though she explicitly defines the Monster as a male character, many critics have found a reason to claim that the Monster's male voice actually represents Shelley's feminine voice, advocating against men's degrading attitude to women. The main reason for that is that it provides the strongest link between the social position of her monster and both Mary Shelley's private and (the developing) public position.

As the first instance of undeniable similarity between Mary Shelley and her Monster, Smolka points out: "[A]s a motherless child and a woman in a patriarchal culture, M. Shelley shared the creature's powerful sense of being born with no identity, without a feminist model to identify with" (18). Hence the following questions of the Monster: "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?" (Shelley 124). Therefore, abandoned by his only parent (Victor Frankenstein), the Monster is forced to take care of himself and acquire knowledge on his own. When dealing with the unfavourable position of women in the private sphere of live, Knudsen states that Frankenstein's abandonment of his *child* "and his unwillingness to even try [to take care of it] is difficult not to parallel to Godwin's neglect of [Shelley] when he remarried" (44). Likewise, Smolka argues:

> The creature's autobiographical descriptions of social rejections are evident when it cries: "Every where I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded" (Shelley 95), and it draws directly on M. Shelley's experience of abandonment and emotional deprivation after her father's remarriage to the repulsive Mrs. Clairmont[5]. (18)

This idea of Shelley's resentment toward her father can also be supported by the fact that the Monster's first victim is Victor's little brother whose name is William. According to Kató, this most certainly "represent[s Shelley's] own oppressed aggression towards her father" (12).

[5] Shelley's father William Goodwin married Jane Clairmont four years after Wollstonecraft died from complications of childbirth (eleven days after Shelley was born). (Mutneanu 4)

Another way of interpreting the unmoored Monster (in regard to the lack of his education) is to contemplate it as Mary Shelley's cry for her long lost mother in the form of a feminist literary predecessor, as Smolka already indicated. "The Monster has to start from 'scratch', just like female writers had to; searching for someone to lean up against and to learn from" (Knudsen 44). Additionally, Tómasson notes how, by "trying to stand on his own, educating himself and trying to become part of society by learning", "the Monster's intellectual journey parallels a woman's education and how she was excluded from society" (23). This theory is mainly supported by the examination of the relationship between Safie and the Monster and its comparison with the relationship between Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft.

The Monster's need for education is (inadvertently) met by Safie whose acquisition of language enables the Monster to learn the language at the same time. Nevertheless, he can only listen to everything that people say, but can never truly participate in their conversations. Collings recognizes this as an essentially female experience: like Mary Shelley, the Monster can only eavesdrop on the conversations of men without being able to join them as an equal. In this way, a parallel can once again be drawn between the Monster and Mary Shelley as well as between Safie and Mary Wollstonecraft. In other words, the Monster and Mary Shelley share the same link to their *teachers*; the only way they can learn from them is through their *letters*, never in the form of an actual dialogue. Likewise, just as the Monster loses its only chance to became an equal and accepted part of the society when Safie runs away with the De Lacey family, "so too Mary Shelley herself was deprived of a feminist role-model and a supportive family when her mother died and was subsequently denounced in the popular British press as a harlot, atheist, and anarchist" ("Usurping the Female" 118). In addition, "Safie's disappearance from the novel reflects Mary Shelley's own predicament. Like Frankenstein's creature, she has no positive prototype she can imitate, no place in history" (118).

The issue of rejection on the grounds of the Monster's outward appearance furthermore corresponds with Shelley's female anxieties of beginning a writing career in the male-biased society of her time:

> [An] aspect of the creature's life that can be paralleled to female experience is the prejudice that he encounters by society based solely on his appearance, and not his eloquence or benevolence. He is never allowed to speak because he is met with fear, disgust and expectations of an evil mind. Women at this time were, perhaps, not met with disgust but most certainly fear. The male society and male authors

> feared intellectual women, who were seen as devilish (like the creature), because they feared they would riot and subsequently seize power. (Knudsen 44)

Therefore, although none of the characters grows to be "more reasonable in *Frankenstein* than the monster" (Youngquist 242), he is still denied the right to speak and to be an equal and respected part of the society, very much like a woman. Also, by "interrogat[ing] and threaten[ing] the privileged status of the masculine within a patriarchal society that insists on female silence" (Earnest 20), the Monster represents an even bigger threat, just like Mary Shelley did as an emerging feminist writer. In other words, by ehxibiting the female experience through the Monster Shelley has shown "that learning in isolation (as was the chief means of women's education during that time period) is very dangerous to society, as well as the individual" (Girard 3).

Some of Shelley's autobiographical elements can be found in other characters as well. Namely, Elizabeth's abandonment of her father after he marries another woman and Safie's loss of a strong and wise mother figure. However, all of the above testifies that the strongest and most consistent autobiographical elements can indeed be seen in the Monster's character.

2.3.3. Destructive Power of Female Absence

The fact that Mary Shelley's female characters in *Frankenstein* are not unimportant as they might first seem has already been proved. On the one hand, their weak and submissive presence served Mary Shelley to show how women were treated by her contemporaries. The task of this chapter is to show that, on the other hand, Shelley's novel can be interpreted so as to consider the female characters as those who actually trigger the ill-fated chain of events in the novel. Curiously enough, it is the very absence of those female characters that makes them so vital. The two female figures whose absence inspires the major events in the novel are the mother and the female companion.

On the one hand, one should consider the importance of the absence of the mother in Shelley's work. Earnest notices that "*Frankenstein* is a story about motherless children" and that "[n]early every character must come to terms with an absent mother". She also provides an elaboration of this phenomenon: as seen in the novel, characters who lose their mothers at a very early age are Caroline, Elizabeth and Safie. The mother in the De Lacey family is "mysteriously absent", whereas Victor's Monster is "notoriously motherless". Furthermore, Justine becomes

motherless later in the book, just like Victor Frankenstein (5). Granted, Earnest sees all this "as a way for Shelley to come to terms with absence of her own mother and her own ambiguous feelings about her own motherhood" (13).[6]

However, it is the death of Victor's mother Caroline that Earnest regards as the instigator of "the pivotal action in the novel", claiming that "[t]he lost object, Victor's dead mother, constantly haunts the texts" and that Victor's main impetus for creating his Monster is the wish to reconstruct her in a way (6). Likewise, David Collings thinks of the whole *Frankenstein* as "[Shelley's] unconscious attempts to recover a relation to a mother who had always been for her a dead mother; perhaps she, like Victor, is compelled to reassemble that impossibly distant body". This provides a new perspective on Victor's original motivation for the creation of the Monster, which is usually interpreted as the act of pure male egotism and overreaching for the forbidden knowledge.

On the other hand, there is the character of Frankenstein's Monster whose wish for a female companion continues the tragic chain of events started by his creator. Although the Monster initially suffers because of the rejection of his *mother* Victor, he turns to rage only after he meets the De Lacey family and learns of their affections and love. The Monster considers a female companion as a way to become an *ordinary* part of the society: "I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which I am now excluded" (Shelley 261). Accordingly, having murdered little William, the Monster sees a locket with Caroline's picture and becomes even angrier because he is aware that he will never be accepted and loved by a woman:

> In spite of my malignity, it softened and attracted me. For a few moments I gazed with delight on her dark eyes, fringed by deep lashes, and her lovely lips; but presently my rage returned; I remembered that I was for ever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures would bestow; and that she whose resemblance I contemplated would in regarding me, have changed that air of benignity to one expressive of disgust and affright. (Shelley 252-253).

The absence of a female companion is also presented in the Monster's recollection of Felix's longing for Safie: "He was always the saddest of the groupe; and, even to my unpractised senses, he appeared to have suffered more deeply than his friends" (Shelley 192). When

[6] Shelley' first child, a girl, died two weeks after she was born. (Munteanu 6)

compared to Victor's "sterile emotion" (Parker) for Elizabeth, this once again serves to show Shelley's propagation of Wollstonecraft's ideas regarding the natural or "ideal" family structure. Victor's patriarchal family organization and its tragic downfall is in contrast with the De Lacey's harmonious unity based on mutual love and friendship who leave their cottage in fear of the Monster, but are implied to have a bright future together.

3. WOMEN IN KENNETH BRANAGH'S *MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN*

3.1. Critics' Point of View

It is a well known fact that a film adaptation of a certain literary work always and invariably represents a distinct and independent work of art, regardless of the extent of resemblance it bears to its literary predecessor. Accordingly, a film adaptation should always be approached to and evaluated as a separate work. It is the director's prerogative to autonomously choose which aspect(s) of the written work he or she wants to present in the film. They might try to produce a faithful adaptation, they might make certain changes they consider more or less necessary (for example, add and/or omit some events, characters, and so on), or they can simply opt for a loosely based adaptation of the literary work by focusing on a completely different aspect altogether.

The director Kenneth Branagh named his film adaptation of Shelley's novel *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* claiming "to understand the spirit of [the novel] - in this instance formulated as author intent - in opposition not only to earlier filmic interpretations of the novel but also to its own textual manifestations" (Ryan 225). Indeed, his work is appreciated as a faithful representation of "the Promethean theme of the overreacher who defies God by assuming his power of creating life" as well as "the Creature's autodidactic acquisition of a voice and his later use of it to face his creator", features which were persistently suppressed in the previous adaptation (Pardo Garcia 230). Yet, in connection to the portrayal of the female characters, many critics consider Branagh's title "a misnomer" (Parker). Taking into consideration that Shelley's novel mainly exhibits men's demeaning and patronizing attitude toward women, it is argued that Branagh's alterations ruined the essence of the original text by giving females a *louder* voice, especially to Elizabeth. To illustrate, Munteanu states:

> Probably nothing is more questionable in Branagh's treatment of the book than the hideous reanimation of Elizabeth[7], which, though intriguing in its suggestions, disregards one of Mary Shelley's main themes—Victor's impossible relationship with Elizabeth and men's difficult relationship with women in general. (224)

[7] After the Monster kills Elizabeth (by ripping her heart out), Victor reanimates Elizabeth by attaching her head to Justine's body. As indicated, the event is purely Branagh's work and does not appear in the novel.

3.2. Enhancement of Elizabeth's Character

Since Elizabeth's character has been singled out as "Branagh's most audacious departure" (Parker) from the novel, which she indeed is, the comparison between Shelley's text and Branagh's film shall start with her. Some claim that, while Shelley does not particularly distinguish Elizabeth's character from any other female character in the novel, Kenneth Branagh deliberately alters Elizabeth's background role to a major extent. Namely, Braun asserts that Branagh transforms her "from Shelley's domestic angel into a well-dressed bundle of Gothic spitfire" (1). Even the director himself admits that he was aware of the fact that Elizabeth was, what Bennett and Curran call, "a minor player" (1) in the original text so that he deliberately decided to change that in his work. He claims that it was important to him to have a very strong woman's role in a film of that size, and not just a token of love interest, and how he wanted Elizabeth and Victor to be two equal partners (Branagh 146). He also adds the following: "Elizabeth is only talked about in the book, and I felt that had to be changed. It seemed ridiculous that she would not question what he was up to, and I felt we had to have her voice in our story" (Branagh qtd. in Ryan 225). Since this obviously does not match Shelley's explicit portrayal of Elizabeth who is usually seen as a prototype of a helpless woman in a male-dominated world, one should first be acquainted with her depiction in Branagh's film adaptation.

Although Elizabeth in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* is as beautiful, kind, and loyal just as the one Shelley created in her work, Branagh's heroine does everything but sit idly and wait for Frankenstein to come back. She openly expresses her pain caused by Victor's blatant negligence, and even though she does temporarily cover for him by presenting her own letters as if they were written by Victor, she refuses to simply accept the situation as it is. On the contrary, she goes to see Victor and demands an explanation. The clash between her love for Victor and her self-respect presents the viewers with one of the most emotion-filled scenes in the movie. Elizabeth is heartbroken after Victor tells her that their relationship comes second to his work, but the strength of her character comes to life when the audience can see her fighting very hard to find the courage (and succeeding in it!) to stand up for herself and say goodbye to Victor. She does, however, return to him later in the film, but only after Victor desperately asks for her forgiveness. Therefore, Elizabeth's previously attributed strength and resolution which Branagh bestowed upon her remain intact.

All this serves to show that Kenneth Branagh's Elizabeth was certainly brought (closer) to the spotlight, unlike Shelley's who was reduced to Victor's feeble love interest for the majority of time. Nevertheless, many tend to forget that, in the novel, Elizabeth is in fact the only

female character which Shelley gives voice to in the first place. Despite the obviously male-dominated narrative, the letters which Elizabeth sends to Victor provide the readers with an insight into her attitudes regarding her inferior position. Also, her testimony for Justine is seen as her loudest protest through which Mary Shelley is said to have voiced her own dissatisfaction with the British judicial system of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ("Usurping the Female" 117). In this manner, Branagh's portrayal of Elizabeth can be interpreted as a *louder,* or "beef[ed] up" (Kaye 249) version of Shelley's character.

What critics additionally fail to notice is that Shelley's female characters are not exclusively made up of weak and voiceless women; a likewise bold female character is already featured in *Frankenstein*. Safie, the Arabian woman, opposes the existing social norms and serves to reinforce Wollstonecraft's ideas regarding the need for social equality between men and women by contradicting her father's will.[8] Yet, since she is not present in Branagh's adaptation, one can argue that Elizabeth simply assumes Safie's role of a strong female who refuses to be a helpless object at the disposal of her fiancé: "In this light, the character of Elizabeth can be read to represent both the authorial authority of Mary Shelley's voice" (Parker), a concept which is actually said to be the running throughout Shelley's narrative (Youngquist 344). In addition, this proves that the already existing Shelley's protest against male dominance was only pushed forward by Branagh:

> Earlier, in the mansion parlor, Elizabeth scolds Victor's egoism ("Don't you think of anyone or anything but yourself?" [Branagh 117]), which arranges Elizabeth as a moral voice that reminds Victor of his *hubris* and resurrects Mary Shelley's use of Victor to represent and comment upon the ramifications the masculine order and masculine ambition. (Parker)

However, the critics are not concerned with those differences as much as with "the events surrounding Elizabeth's role toward the end of the film" (Parker). The fact that Branagh made Elizabeth more assertive as well as that he allowed Victor to reanimate her after the Monster kills her is said to have ruined the underlying feminist theory of male fear of female sexuality. However, Kaye sees this only as an extension of the concept of female inferiority and

[8] Her tyrant father wants to take her with him contrary to Safie's wishes, but she manages to escape and reunite with Felix.

helplessness. In fact, she explains that Elizabeth's both murder and reanimation are actually a punishment for her denial of the expected submissive female behaviour:

> She is ultimately punished for her assertion by both creature and creator. Whereas the former tears out her heart because no one loves him, the latter cuts off her head and puts it on Justine's body to recreate her in his own way, rather than putting Justine's heart into Elizabeth's body She is denied further power of articulate speech by the two men, who struggle over her reanimated body as if she were a rag doll, each pulling at an arm. All she can do is assert her will in self-annihilation. (249)

This idea of punishing the assertiveness of women seen in Branagh's film can also be traced to Shelley's novel. There, Caroline Frankenstein is "punished for her imprudence[9] - defiance of the family's judgment, which surely means the father's - by herself falling victim" (Bennett and Curran 5). Therefore, her death functions as a "warning about female assertiveness, however benevolent" (5). Additionally, Kaye considers the reanimation scene as Branagh's representation of "Shelley's nightmare about her own dead baby coming back[10] (...) which was the germ of the novel" (249). This can be compared to the filmic representation of Caroline's death through which the director did not only retain the original motif of female selflessness, but he also connected it to Mary Shelley's personal experience, which shall be further discussed in the next chapter. However, one should note that Branagh's most important change in regard to Elizabeth character is the way she dies (the second time). After Victor reanimates her, Elizabeth decides to end her life on her own by setting herself on fire, since she does not want to live in a world where men control women in life, like in death.

All in all, one fact is still inevitable: "While Branagh partially succeeds in remaking Elizabeth as a more developed character, she ultimately becomes a body only" (Parker), just like Shelley's Elizabeth is killed at the end of the novel.

[9] When Elizabeth catches the scarlet fever Caroline is warned not to go see her, but she refuses to obey her husband and dies as a result of contracting the disease.

[10] Shelley's had a nightmare of her dead daughter coming to life. (Munteanu 8)

3.3. Branagh's Take on Other Female Characters

On the one hand, Safie's character, or rather the absence of her character in Branagh's adaptation, has already been accounted for. Her distinct, bold features uncharacteristic of women of Shelley's time are attributed to Elizabeth. On the other hand, by replacing her harmonious and loving relationship with Felix with a nameless husband and wife, the director of the film did not deprive his film of her significance in terms of representing an equal part of the family as a woman[11], instead of being subjected to a man.

The next character who has undergone certain alterations in the film adaptation is Caroline Beaufort. There are two major changes that Kenneth Branagh introduced in his work regarding her character. To start with, one can notice the difference in the way the two *Carolines* die: Shelley's Caroline dies after contracting the scarlet fever while taking care of Elizabeth as explained earlier, whereas Branagh's character dies during childbirth urging her husband to save the baby. Although different, these two acts obviously share a common origin – they emphasize the sacrifice that women are willing to take for another person, a trait exclusively connected to women in Shelley's time.

Moreover, instead of the alleged *ruining* of Shelley's original idea by changing its execution, Kenneth Branagh actually brought one of the most important issues in *Frankenstein* to the surface in doing so. As Diane Long Hoeveler states, "[t]he novel functions as a form of therapy for [Mary Shelley] trying to resolve the consequences of her traumatic birth and troubled childhood" after having lost a mother and her own child (7). Kaye likewise claims: "Having Victor's mother die in childbirth is a reference to Mary Wollstonecraft's death after Mary Shelley's birth" (249). In other words, Branagh's representation of Caroline's death exhibits the selflessness of her character featured in the novel, while simultaneously highlighting Shelley's (female) anxieties about pregnancy and childbirth which are in fact, as it has previously been established, the underlying key issues of her text.

The second Branagh's alteration that can be noticed is the absence of Caroline's picture in the locket[12] which the Monster originally finds on little William upon murdering him and subsequently puts on Justine thus framing her for the crime he committed. In the novel, Caroline's picture serves as a symbol of the absent mother reminding the Monster of his lack of

[11] Safie and Felix's relationship is presented as "an alternative social organization in the novel" ("Usurping the Female" 117) based on mutual respect. Branagh replaces them (as well as Agatha) with an equally loving (nameless) family defying the strict division of the female and male sphere of life.

[12] The locket in the film contains a picture of Victor Frankenstein.

both a mother and of a female companion. Therefore, this change can be said to have affected the interpretation of the Monster's increasing wish for a female. As seen later in the film, however, the Monster's longing for a female is still present. Nevertheless, Kenneth Branagh provides a different object altogether which replaces Caroline's picture and functions as an equal symbol of her destructive absence:

> Kenneth Branagh's 1994 film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* invents a going-away party for Victor on the eve of his departure for university at Ingolstadt. Midway through the festivities, Alphonse stops the music and dancing to present his son with a [journal] from the dead Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein (...) This blank book from the absent mother exemplifies the way Branagh's film makes explicit themes that remain submerged in Shelley's novel, where the maternal signifier is not a journal but Caroline's portrait, which travels from William to Justine, marking both for death. (Hunter 2)

In this manner, since the critics have already established that Shelley's "*Frankenstein* is simultaneously about the death and obviation of the mother and about a son's quest for a substitute object of desire" (Homans quoted in Christie 15), it is obvious that Branagh's introduction of the journal does not alter the consequences of the mother's absence in Shelley's text. Conversely, by understanding that Caroline's death in the novel is indeed "the catalyst that drives Victor Frankenstein to create a monster" (Earnest 12), it can be concluded that Kenneth Branagh has only made Victor's primary impetus for creating his Monster - the death/absence of the mother - more explicit by providing a scene in which Frankenstein swears on his mother's grave that he will learn how to create life out of death.

The last female character to be discussed is Justine Moritz. In regard to her, Branagh's work is usually approved of since Justine was usually omitted in the previous film adaptations of *Frankenstein.* Pardo García considers Justine's character extremely important in connection to the female concerns that Shelley emphasized in her novel. According to him, Justine "points to a larger motif, that of the natural and familial milieu—to which Justine belongs and from which Victor radically severs himself for the sake of science—and therefore to the female critique of male aspiration subtly articulated by that [familial or domestic] milieu" (228) which women were habitually relegated to. Having been set up for a crime she did not commit and not having the chance to defend herself she is "thus included in the discourse on social victimisation" (Pardo García 228):

> Justine is equated to the creature as the mob's scapegoat, as the victim of monster-making and monster-chasing which uses exclusion as community affirmation. The fact that this scapegoat is female, and that her body, like Victor's mother's at the beginning and Elizabeth's at the end, is cruelly destroyed, emphasises the representation of the female as victim of male desire and violence. (228-229).

Also, as Kaye explained, the fact that Victor took Justine's body and put only Elizabeth's head on it in order to reanimate Elizabeth once more shows that man exercised their superiority over women in life and in death (249).

In the end, it can be concluded that Branagh's film adaptation does justice to Shelley's novel in regard to women after all, since the outcome of all exhibited female characters - Elizabeth, Caroline, Justine - mirrors that of Shelley's novel. The inevitable destruction of female characters indicates that women features in both works were ultimately not able to rise above their pre-set roles and achieve a social status reserved for men, despite the fact that Branagh gave them a much louder voice, and, in Elizabeth's case, the ability to at least choose to die on their own terms.

4. FILM ADAPTATION IN THE CLASSROOM: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

As seen in the previous two chapters, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a complex novel dealing with many important social issues which are present even nowadays. Shelley's portrayal of women and their social status is a broad issue which represents an extensive discussion topic on its own. However, it is even more interesting to compare it to the director Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* and his take on the issue. This discussion topic is, of course, appropriate for secondary (high-school) students, who posses adequate language skills as well as enough personal experience to be able to respond to the topic. Consequently, a lesson plan based on the exploration of the similarities and differences of the position of women between Shelley's novel and Branagh's film adaptation might be organized in a number of ways.

To start, one first has to motivate the students in order to make them interested in the topic. Of course, it would be ideal if the students have read the novel and watched the film prior to the interpretation, but that might not always be the case. However, the interpretation of the specific theme (the position of women) can start with a few questions on whether the students are acquainted with *Frankenstein* and a conversation on the issues it might deal with. Next, the teacher can motivate the students by reading a few interesting passages on women from the novel, such as Victor's recounting how his mother was a women "of an uncommon mould" (Shelley 35) for taking care of herself and her father, or the part in which Elizabeth testifies in Justine's favour in court. In addition, certain clips from Branagh's film which oppose the novel's plot can also be shown. For example, after reading a passage from the novel featuring Elizabeth's submissiveness, the students may watch the scene where she follows Victor to Ingolstadt and breaks off their engagement after he tells her that she comes second to his work.

If the students have already read the novel and seen the film, the teacher may present them with a short biography on Mary Shelley featuring the fact that she was the daughter of one of the earliest feminist writers and encourage them to think of the reasons why Shelley decided to make their female characters as weak and submissive. Moreover, they can be presented with the critics' both positive and negative opinion on Branagh's film and asked to consider whether the film is faithful to Shelley's text or not. Their attitudes may be presented through a conversation in order to be written down afterwards, or the other way around.

The main part of the lesson - the very interpretation, or the comparison between the novel and the film - can also be done in multiple ways and it can include tasks before and after reading the novel and/or watching the film. For example, prior to the students' reading of the text, the

teacher might ask them to pay special attention to the female characters in form of a literary journal: the students have to write their opinions on certain characters (Elizabeth, Caroline, Justine) and support them with quotes from the text. Likewise, they may be asked to write notes on the same characters during the film. In class, their notes can be used for an oral discussion about the female characters and their social status. The easiest way of comparing the two works is to list the similarities and differences between them in the form of a table on the blackboard. This way, the interpretation is made easier because the students can always return to a certain issue in order to discuss it further or add a new one.

Also, an extremely effective way of providing students with visual stimuli is to draw a diagram of the relationships between the characters. Namely, the teacher can put Elizabeth's name in the circle in the middle of the blackboard and disperse the other characters around her (Victor, the Monster, Caroline, Alphonse, Justine). Then, the students have to explain the relationship between Elizabeth and another character while supporting their claims with textual proof at the same time. The same method can separately be applied for the film, or it can be marked with a different chalk colour on the blackboard.

Moreover, the students might be divided into several groups and asked to study a certain female character (Elizabeth, Caroline, Justine, Safie, Margaret Walton). After studying the character, their task might be to write a short composition on the character which is then read in the classroom and open for further discussion in regard to the character's filmic counterparts (or the absence of one).

The students may also simply be asked questions and encouraged to form an attitude toward a certain issue. To illustrate, a teacher can write a set of questions on the blackboard which would then be discussed together with the teacher: *Which characters feature some of Mary Shelley's personal experiences and what are those experiences? Why did Victor Frankenstein create/abandon his Monster? How does Kenneth Branagh depict Shelley's concept of the absent mother?*

The final part of the lesson would either be an oral discussion or a written composition on the female concerns and social issues presented in Shelley's and Branagh's works and their reflection in the contemporary world. The students would be asked to consider in which areas the female experience has improved, and in which the women have still remained deprived of the equal status in the society.

5. CONCLUSION

Since it was first published in 1818, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has inspired a large number of people around the word. Film and show makers, together with video-game makers and even musical producers have made over one hundred adaptations among themselves, while the works of literary authors and critics featuring or discussing the Frankenstein motif are innumerable. The motif in question is Shelley's exploration of the scientific advancement connected to the Enlightenment which most adaptations focus on and consider the source of horror in *Frankenstein*. The literary critics, however, search for the horror elsewhere: their attention is mostly turned to exploring the underlying messages of Shelley's "Frankensteinian landscape of male-autocracy" (Bennett and Curran 8).

The said explorations were motivated by the strange fact that Mary Shelley, daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft - the author of the seminal feminist text *A Vindication of Rights of Woman* - wrote a text which reinforces the traditional ideal of submissive women. This meant that women had no other duties but serving the people around them (mostly men but also children), taking care of them, raising their spirits and staying away from any formal education which would allow them to climb up on the social ladder next to men. As expected, the careful review of the exhibited male-biased social norms produced a completely opposite perspective of the matter. To use the words of Louise Othello Knudsen,

> That Mary Shelley excluded female voicing in her novel by choosing three male narrators and furthermore presented women as idealized objects confined to the private sphere are examples where she endorsed the traditional gender roles of the time. But when the novel presents (...) men as egotistical over-reachers whose exclusion of women makes monsters[,] that can be read as Mary Shelley's challenge of those gender norms. (48)

The main point of Shelley's criticism in *Frankenstein*, inspired by Wollstonecraft's work, is the strict division between the public and the private sphere of life, or rather male and female dispositions and obligations. On the one side, she depicts the general female helplessness and confinement to domestic life which inevitably results in female destruction. Apart from reflecting her mother's condemnation of "society's relegation of women to the status of puppets" (Bennett and Curran 4) in general, this is also seen as Shelley's protest of dissatisfaction with her own unfavourable position as an upcoming female literary author, which can be seen in the

social rejection of her Monster. On the other hand, all tragic events in *Frankenstein* are shown to stem directly not only from men's subjugation of women, but also from men's deliberate detachment from the emotional sphere of life. As Smolka states, "Frankenstein's rejection of his Creature signals the male isolation from the realm of domesticity, the sphere that women are supposed to have control of" (26). And it is exactly this isolation resulting in Victor's inability to care for his Monster that leads to the downfall of all characters who represent the stereotypes, both men and women. Therefore, it is obvious to what extent the male-biased society limited women's development, but the key message Mary Shelley tried to convey is that the existing social system resulted in an arrest of social development on the whole.

In connection to the theory that Shelley's novel in fact promotes the female importance and the destructive consequences of female absence, one can consider that Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, contrary to the popular belief, does the same. Despite the fact that Branagh made his female characters more prominent and introduced certain elements which seemingly have no connection to the original story (for example, the journal which Victor receives as a present from his late mother Caroline), his adaptation nevertheless reinforces the original messages of Shelley's novel. Although some of his female characters (especially Elizabeth) possess a stronger spirit and strive to influence men unlike Shelley's women, they are still unable to cross the boundaries of the male-biased society and are eventually punished for the assertiveness inconsistent with their expected societal role, just like their literary counterparts.

In conclusion, it is easy to see that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a unique work of fiction which in an extremely cunning way both mirrors the societal constructs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and speaks against them. Its unusual solution for the depiction of the obvious real life issues and female concerns still represents a fruitful discussion topic in and out of the classrooms. And it surely will continue to do so, for many years to come.

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