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English 102.01

June 18, 2019

The Women in *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* is perhaps best known for its presentation of the dangers of scientific exploration and the effects of the failure to fulfill one's domestic responsibilities. However, a very closely related subject with regards to the novel is the treatment of women. Without them, much of the action of the novel would be quite different. Although most of the women may appear to be helpless, there is actually a wide range of power enjoyed by the female characters in the novel. While Justine has only a little power, and Elizabeth only a little more, Safie actually enjoys a large amount of control in the novel.

Indeed, Justine has very little power in the novel. When she is first introduced, Elizabeth describes to Victor that her situation is very unfortunate. "Her mother could not endure her," Elizabeth tells him, "and after the death of M. Moritz, treated her very ill" (Shelley 40). Even though Caroline Frankenstein tries to make her life better by removing her from her mother's house, she returns home shortly after Victor's departure to be subjected to more abuse, ending only with her mother's death (41). Afterwards, she returns to the Frankenstein household, where she serves as a caretaker for the younger children, only to be accused of William's murder after she has gone off to visit an aunt (53). At her trial, she is powerless to respond effectively to all the evidence against her. As she tells the court, she knows that the evidence of the locket weighs heavily against

her, “but I have no power of explaining it; and when I have expressed my utter ignorance, I am only left to conjecture concerning the probabilities by which it might have been placed in my pocket” (Shelley 53). Because she is unable to explain the existence of the locket in her dress, she is ultimately convicted. As William Veeder explains, “Justine proves incapable of saving herself” (Veeder 272). For Justine, it seems that the lack of ability to which Veeder refers may indeed stem from her status as a poor woman.

Because Justine has had little choice but to serve the traditional female role of caregiver within her family—they lack the resources of the Frankensteins, who hire her to care for their children, for example—there is no chance for her to go out and get an education on how the legal system works. Thus, she lacks the knowledge that could perhaps have helped her protect herself from the powerful judicial system, and she ends up hanged.

While Justine appears totally helpless, Elizabeth Lavenza is presented as a character with a little more power in the novel. In fact, during her childhood, she is treated as almost the intellectual equal to Victor. As he recalls, “We learned Latin and English, that we might read the writings in those languages” (Shelley 20). To be sure, Latin was not a typical subject of study for young women of the time, so Elizabeth appears to have a privileged position within the Frankenstein household. Unfortunately, this prestigious situation does not last long. By the time she is an adult, she finds herself restricted to the Frankenstein household even as Victor is able to go off to university for six years and then, shortly after his return, go off on a trip to Great Britain for two years. As Victor explains, Elizabeth can’t help feeling a little jealous of her more fortunate sibling: “Elizabeth approved of the reasons for my departure, and only regretted that she had not the same opportunities of enlarging her experience, and cultivating her

understanding” (Shelley 106). As a woman, Elizabeth finds herself bound to her domestic existence even as Victor is allowed to go off and experience the world. When he finally returns and the two characters get married, the true powerlessness of Elizabeth is shown when the Creature murders her on her wedding night (135).

Although Justine and Elizabeth’s lives end abruptly, not every female character endures such bitterness in the end. In fact, Safie experiences most of her turmoil at the beginning of her story, when she is unable to do anything to stop the persecution of her father by the French authorities (Shelley 82). However, after Felix secures her father’s freedom, Safie is able to experience more freedom and power. When her father attempts to make her join a harem, she instead runs away from him, travels all the way to Germany and reunites with Felix, her affection for whom has begun to develop in response to his assistance of her father (83). As the creature explains, “A residence in Turkey was abhorrent to her; her religion and feelings were alike adverse to it” (85). Fortunately, she is able to act on her beliefs, instead of remaining subject to her father’s will, and escapes to a better life with Felix. In this way, she differs sharply from Justine, for example, who passively obeys her oppressive mother and remains uneducated and helpless until her death. Thus, as Anne Mellor explains, Safie is an “alternative female role-model of an independent, well-educated, self-supporting, and loving companion,” and the De Lacey household represents an “alternative nuclear family structure based on sexual equality and mutual affection” (Mellor 277). Indeed, unlike even the well-intentioned Frankensteins, the De Laceys offer an example of a female character who is not an ultimate victim of oppression and disappointment.

In the end, although none of the characters plays central roles in the novel, the characters of Justine, Elizabeth, and Safie demonstrate the range of possibilities for women in the world of the Frankensteins and De Laceys. While the former two characters experience tremendous pain and misery, Safie shows that there may still be hope for women who insist upon securing a more rewarding position in society.

Works Cited

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