

Susan Farrell

ENGL 299

Anne K. Mellor's "Possessing Nature: The Female in *Frankenstein*"

Mellor begins her argument by identifying Nature as a passive female entity and a willing vessel for man's desire. Nature is representative of the general cultural and societal view of the female. Victor Frankenstein's desire to seek out Nature's secrets through the means of science and technology is the result of the male aspiration to dominate the female and create a world in which the female is unnecessary. His main pursuit is to create his own race of men to which he will be the sole creator, removing the biological and societal purpose of the female. He is, in effect, creating a world for men only. In discovering the secrets of creation, he usurps the place of the female, denying both her sexuality and her role in society. Victor's denial of the female ultimately leads to his downfall.

Mellor describes the dangers of a society that denies the value of women or restricts them to predefined gender roles. Shelley depicts a social construct in which the men are part of the public sphere, focusing on work and education, while women are confined to the private sphere at home. Labor and intellectual pursuits are separated from the emotional. Frankenstein separates himself from his loved ones in order to complete his monstrous project. This separation leads Frankenstein to lose the love and empathy that could have stopped him from completing the creature, or at the very least allowed him to feel pity and responsibility for him.

The separation of the public and private sphere is detrimental to both men and women. The death of Frankenstein's mother is the direct result of her devotion to her womanly role. She

insists on nursing the sick Elizabeth and falls ill herself. The very gender role she inhabits leads to her death. The allocating of women in to the private sector means that they are unable to successfully participate in the public sphere. When Elizabeth speaks out in Justine's defense, her emotional plea is ineffective. Despite her innocence, Justine is murdered. Victor refuses to speak out on Justine's behalf because of his own devotion to the public sector. He fears the wrath of the creature and the damage his reputation could incur if he speaks out. Victor's selfish actions are in stark contrast to the self-sacrificing female presented in the characterization of the women in the novel.

The De Lacey family is presented as an alternative to the restrictive, patriarchal standard that permeates the novel. The work of the household is shared equally between Felix and Agatha. They both provide and sacrifice for their father. Despite their poverty, the De Lacey's are shown to have a loving, affectionate relationship based on equality. It is impossible not to compare the De Lacey family to the Frankenstein family. Felix and Safie provide a glimpse of the loving relationship that would have been possible for Victor and Elizabeth if they were not confined to their gender roles and allocated spheres. Felix risks his own welfare to free Safie's father from wrongful imprisonment because of his own sense of justice. But Victor was unwilling to speak out on behalf of Justine. Safie breaks free of her passive female role by escaping her dominating father, traveling alone to the cottage of the De Lacey's, and reuniting with her lover Felix. The De Lacey family is truly the most functional and affectionate family illustrated in the novel.

*Yet, they lack a mother figure - perhaps causing their ultimate rejection of the creature?*

The separation of the public and private spheres predetermines a particular view of female sexuality as well. Mellor argues that female sexuality is what Victor fears the most. <sup>yes.</sup> This is evident when Victor chooses to destroy the female companion he has been assembling for his

creature. Victor justifies his actions by describing the dangers of the female sexual will. He worries that the female creature will be independent enough to make her own choices, refusing to submit to the male creature. The female creature may indulge her own desires, which Victor suspects will be malicious in nature. These desires may include preferring to mate with human males rather than the male creature. Most of all, Victor is afraid of the female monster's ability to reproduce on her own terms and create an entire race of monsters. The female creature is described as an independent, sexually free woman able to choose her own mate, possibly by force, and reproduce at will. ✓

According to Mellor, Victor views this alternative woman as a hideous, deformed demon due to his predisposed ideals of a woman as passive and submissive to her husband. The language Shelley uses to describe the destruction of the female creature is even more graphic in nature. Mellor compares the scene to that of a violent rape. Victor tears the creature apart in to mangled pieces, reasserting his power over female sexuality. Victor seeks to dominate and even destroy female sexuality. This fear is a result of the patriarchal definition of gender. Geneva is presented as the standard for this patriarchal society. The women of Geneva are sexually repressed. Caroline Beaufort is devoted first to her father, and then to her husband, represented as a chaste caretaker. Victor's relationship with Elizabeth is friendly and brotherly. Elizabeth is described as a childlike pet, never as a sexual being. ✓

Considering this context, the death of Elizabeth becomes even more significant. When Victor finds his dead fiancé, she is hanging off their wedding bed in an erotic pose. Mellor compares this scene to Henry Fuseli's painting "The Nightmare," considered an iconic image of female sexual desire. Mellor argues that this signifies Victor's fear of his own bride's sexuality. Elizabeth would still be alive if Victor had gone to bed with his new wife, rather than sending ✓

her to the room alone. The scene of Victor rushing to embrace the dead Elizabeth is reminiscent of his former dream when Victor held the living Elizabeth only to watch her become the corpse of his dead mother. Mellor suggests that this reveals Victor's deepest necrophiliac and incestuous desire: to seize the dead female and his own mother. Mellor takes this assertion one step further by claiming that Victor's preference for forming close personal relationships with men rather than women, and the homoerotic subtext of his creation of the creature implies Victor's desire to not only possess his dead mother but to usurp her place by becoming a mother himself.

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Victor Frankenstein seeks to dominate Nature, stealing its deepest secrets and effectively raping her. He fears female sexuality and the woman's control of the reproductive process. Victor, and the patriarchal society he represents, uses the power of science and technology to control and repress women. Victor's creation becomes the very instrument of his desire to destroy women and create a world in which only men rule. Nature fights back against Victor's attempted domination. It is not in actuality a passive female figure. Victor is denied physical health during his endeavor and with the completion of the creature Victor is struck with a fit that leads to months of confinement. The images of Nature presented as Victor works on his original creation and later the female companion are those of violent storms and terrifying lightning. Victor's creatures are denied normal human forms because they were created outside of Nature. When Victor's unnatural creature murders his wife on their wedding night, Victor is denied the possibility of creating a child naturally. By the end of the novel, he is left without any progeny and utterly destroyed by Nature. Nature's revenge is complete when Victor meets his death by exposure.

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While Nature can destroy, she can also reward those that love and respect her. Clerval's close relationship with nature is rewarded with a generous and sympathetic nature that allows him a limitless aptitude for friendship. Nature is depicted as a sacred force that must be respected. The characters of the novel that are respectful of nature are rewarded with health and happiness. Frankenstein becomes insensitive to the beauty of Nature and family affection, leading to his unhappy fate. Nature requires the sacrifice of individual needs for the needs of the family and community. Those who would devote themselves to Nature and reap her benefits must do the same. The De Lacey/s are presented as an example of this sacrifice. Mellor argues that the moral purpose of the novel is to show the benefits of an interdependent, self-sacrificing family over one based on patriarchal values. Shelley argues for balance between ambition and familial obligation.

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Works Cited

- Mellor, Anne K. "Possessing Nature: The Female in *Frankenstein*." *Frankenstein*. By Mary Shelley. Ed. J. Paul Hunter. Norton Critical Editions. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 2012. 355-368. Print.