



Voice and Agency in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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Abstract

This thesis will explore how the different social positions of characters are reflected through their use of voice and agency. The characters that will be looked at are Elizabeth Lavenza and the Creature, and their social positions will primarily be analysed as being in relation to that of Victor Frankenstein. By analysing the voice and agency of these characters with the help of post-colonial theory and the concept of the male and female sphere, this thesis will conclude that the difference in voice and agency can be attributed to the Western, patriarchal society, which reflect the main character's European-male-centred world view.

Key terms: agency, female sphere, male sphere, the Other, postcolonialism, personae, voice.

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Introduction

Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* is a topic of interest for many scholars. A lot of research has been done regarding the relationship between *Frankenstein* and different theoretical frameworks such as feminism and postcolonialism, but there seems to be a gap in the discussion when it comes to voice and agency. There are different ways to define voice and agency. In order to prevent confusion, this section will explain how these concepts are used in this paper.

Voice has been described by Webb Keane as “the linguistic construction of social personae [that] addresses the question of “Who is speaking?” in any stretch of discourse”¹. Personae, or persona, is defined by the online Oxford Dictionary as “the aspect of someone's character that is presented to or perceived by others” as well as “a role or character adopted by an author or an actor”². If voice is “the linguistic construction of social personae” that means that voice is a way to communicate a specific social role in a way that can present someone's character or that presents how they want to be perceived. Looking at voice means looking at “the diverse processes through which social identities are represented, performed, transformed, evaluated, and contested”³.

Keane explains that there are two common ways of looking at voice: politics and epistemology. When looking at voice through a political lens means looking at representation and authority⁴: who has a voice? Looking at voice through an epistemological lens means looking at the relation between one's identity,

¹ Webb Keane, “Voice,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9, no. 1/2 (1999): 271.

² Lexico, s.v. “personae,” accessed September 6, 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/persona>.

³ Keane, “Voice,” 271.

⁴ Ibid.

experiences, and viewpoints: claiming one's own voice⁵. These culminate in the use of voice to claim and communicate a position and identity. When, how, and why people speak gives their environment a certain impression. Voice can be used to establish an identity. As Keane explains: "every speaker has available numerous ways of speaking that are associated by virtue of linguistic ideologies with different character types, genders, social statuses, kinship roles, moral stances, ideological systems, age groups, ethnicities, and so forth"⁶. Literary archetypes provide a good illustration for this: the soft-spoken housewife, the loud and rebellious youth, or the villain who speaks in long and difficult to understand monologues. Voice is a very diverse tool: the speaker can claim different identities at different times. If the speaker is aware of the different 'options' available to them, they could use voice to manipulate others or to trick them into perceiving them in a specific way. This has been taken into account by Keane, who states that individuals do not necessarily seek a voice that is authentically theirs and that "the internal complexity of the language-using subject is inseparable from its articulation with a social world of other subjects, both present and absent in any given context"⁷.

Voice has recently made a comeback as a subject of interest due to its connection to identity and agency. Keane looked at how voice was used in conversations and he concluded that it showed the "articulation of macro and micro scales of power"⁸. He also noted that the listener played a part in the use of voice, since they are the one constructing an identity based on what is being said. Keane concluded that a listeners' (in)ability to distinguish between the speaker and the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Keane, "Voice," 272.

⁷ Keane, "Voice," 273.

⁸ Keane, "Voice," 272.

assumed role can have important social consequences, with the example given being “the occlusion or diffusion of responsibility”⁹.

Agency is defined by Laura M. Ahearn as “a way to talk about the human capacity to act”¹⁰. The use of agency in this context dates back to the 1970s, when academics - inspired by activists challenging existing power structures in order to achieve equality – wanted to develop new theories “that would do justice to the potential effects of human action”¹¹. The popularisation of *agency* lies with sociologist Anthony Giddens. Giddens and his contemporaries focused on the mutually constitutive relationship between human actions and social structures¹². It being a mutually constitutive relationship means that human action and social structures establish each other: “human beings make society even as society makes them”¹³.

An important thing to note here is that agency is not the same as free will, nor is it always an act of rebellion or resistance: there are social, cultural, and linguistic constraints on actions and acts of agency may very well be in line with the status quo¹⁴. Agency refers to the capacity to act, not how one acts. In researching agency, Ahearn looked at agency as something conceptualised by society instead of something that can be located or measured¹⁵. An important question for her research was: who is believed to be able to exercise agency? When approaching agency like this, it becomes obvious that the ability or inability to act is rooted in social structures and ideas. Ahearn’s question of who society believes to be able to exercise agency

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Laura M. Ahearn, “Agency,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9, no. 1/2 (1999): 12.

¹¹ Ahearn, “Agency,” 12.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ahearn, “Agency,” 13.

¹⁵ Ibid.

ties back to agency not being the same as free will. Those not believed to be able to exercise agency will not be able to exercise agency since sociocultural environment will not allow for it: human beings make society even as society makes them.

Ahearn explains that anthropologists interested in agency look at how speech reveals what people think about the social actions of themselves and others. This is possible because language itself is a social action: “studies of language use reveal how culture in all its forms emerges dialogically from everyday linguist interactions that are themselves shaped by sociocultural formulations”¹⁶. Because *Frankenstein* does not have an omniscient narrator this becomes a good avenue for literary analysis since the language characters use is the only insight into their (perceived) capacity to act.

What makes *Frankenstein* particularly interesting when it comes to looking at the representation of voice and agency is the narrative framework. *Frankenstein* is an epistolary novel, meaning it is told through a series of letters. In the case of *Frankenstein* the letters in question are those from Captain Robert Walton to his sister Margaret Saville, and they document his voyage across the North Pole and the tale told to him by Victor Frankenstein, a man he and his crew rescued. Victor Frankenstein tells Walton about his childhood, his time at university that culminated in him creating the Creature, and the tragedies that followed. Victor’s story holds the Creature’s story within it, for it was told to Victor when the two met face-to-face on Mont Blanc two years after Victor abandoned him. The ones telling the story, Walton and Victor, are those with social power: both are well-educated, rich, white, European men. Mary Shelley herself also belonged to the socially privileged: she

¹⁶ Ahearn, “Agency,” 13.

could afford being a writer, after all. Her father, William Godwin, was a philosopher who believed in an equalitarian society and who criticised aristocratic privilege¹⁷. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, is best known for her feminist writing such as *A Vindication for the Rights of Women* (1792). While a brief look at the author can provide an interesting context for analysing a text, one has to remember Roland Barthes' death of the author¹⁸ and examine the text based on what is in the text.

The narrators being of the socially and economically privileged class that they are brings forth the idea that the way the narrative frames the Creature and Elizabeth Lavenza reveals a lot about how these characters are viewed by Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein. The question guiding this paper is: how is voice and agency presented in *Frankenstein*, and how does this shape the narrative?

The hypothesis is that the analysis of the voice and agency given to the Creature will show similarities to the way non-Europeans were represented in colonial writings, and that the voice and agency given to Elizabeth will connect to the position women had at the time. Their voice and agency are expected to be constrained by their social situation but also by how they are perceived by Victor. Hopefully the analysis of the voice and agency of the Creature and Elizabeth Lavenza will not only reveal more about them, but also about Victor Frankenstein. Concepts from feminist and postcolonial theory will be used in order to analyse the social constraints placed upon the characters of Elizabeth and the Creature respectively.

¹⁷ Mark Philp, "William Godwin," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/godwin/>.

¹⁸ William H. Gass, "The Death of the Author," *Salmagundi*, no. 65 (1984): 3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40547668>.

The Creature and Postcolonialism

*There was a human being within [the sledge] whom the sailors were persuading to enter the vessel. He was not, as the other traveller seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island, but a European.*¹⁹

When Robert Walton first describes Victor he compares him to the only other traveller he saw on the ice, The Creature. This description situates Victor as being a European and The Creature as a non-European savage. This prominent dichotomy between a European and a savage from some island immediately places The Creature in the position of the Other. The Other is a concept from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), one of the most important works for the development of postcolonial theory. *Orientalism* looked at how The Orient was portrayed as being the opposite of the West, specifically the British Empire²⁰. From this came the concept of the Other. The Other is the opposite to the Self and this opposition between Self and Other - or simply referring to the Other - is often used in feminist, queer, and postcolonial theory²¹. The Self (generally white, male, and European) is the positive, the ideal, with The Other (women, a person of colour, or Non-European) being a negative reflection of the Self²². When looking at The Creature as being the Other, a negative reflection, the scene of his 'birth' comes to mind. Victor had intended for the Creature to be beautiful, an ideal creation, but upon seeing it come to life the only thing Victor

¹⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, "*Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus (the 1818 Text)*," in *Frankenstein: the 1818 Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. J. Paul Hunter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 14.

²⁰ Shahla Burney, "Orientalism: The Making of the Other," *Counterpoints*, 2012, Vol. 417, PEDAGOGY of the Other: Edward Said, Postcolonial Theory, and Strategies for Critique (2012): 24.

²¹ Sayyed R. Moosavinia, Nozar Niazi, Ahmad Ghaforian, "Edward Said's Orientalism and the Study of the Self and the Other in Orwell's *Burmese Days*," *Studies in Literature and Language* 2, no. 1 (January 2011): 105.

²² Moosavinia, Niazi, and Ghaforian, "Edward Said's Orientalism," 105.

feels is repulsion: “the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart”²³.

*I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!.*²⁴

By deciding with what The Creature was supposed to be, a new Self almost, Victor condemned The Creature to a position of not being what he should be. Ghiasuddin Alizadeh, who has written about the Creature being representative of those Othered by society, attributes the tragic ending of the novel to Victor’s inability to acknowledge the nature and limitations of knowledge, and his lack of understanding when it comes to freedom and liberty²⁵. The Creature became an Other from the moment he was created, not only by being different from every other being by nature, but also by not fitting in with the ideal that was set for him by his creator.

Victor’s repulsion upon being confronted with The Creature for the first time can also be seen as similar to how the Other was created to strengthen the identify and superiority of the colonizers²⁶: by depicting The Creature as a cruel and vile creature Victor does not have to feel guilty for how he treats him, because he is above him and knows best. When Victor tells his story to Walton, he describes his desire to create

²³ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 36.

²⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 35.

²⁵ Ghiasuddin Alizadeh, “More Horrible than the Monster: Social Antagonism and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,” in *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2018): 204 - 206.

²⁶ Moosavinia, Niazi, and Ghaforian, “Edward Said’s Orientalism,” 105.

The Creature as being “like a mountain river, from ignoble and almost forgotten sources”²⁷. The word ignoble is often used in the context of colonialism to refer to an ignoble versus a noble savage. Moosavinia et al. explain ‘savage’ as being the word places upon the colonized by the colonisers, who see themselves as being “the embodiment of proper self [and who] treat the colonized as ‘not fully human’”²⁸. A distinction is made between two kinds of savages: there is the ignoble savage, “who is evil as well as inferior”, and the noble savage, who “is perceived as possessing a “primitive” beauty or nobility born of a closeness to nature”²⁹. Both are still ‘savages’ though, meaning both are seen as not being fully human.

It is telling that the first descriptions of the Creature feature these concepts. Throughout the novel, the Creature is continuously seen as this threat, a social outsider, and a violent savage. But this savage danger is not who the Creature wishes to be, he just wants to be a part of society³⁰. John Bugg has written about the importance of mastering language when it comes to finding a place for oneself in society. With the Creature the use of language as a device to find a place in society is shown through his interactions with the De Lacey family. As he observes them he figures out that the way to form a possible connection with them, and by extension other humans, is by learning to communicate with them³¹. For the Creature, language and literacy became tools with which he could change his social position, not too unlike the way language worked for those living under colonial rule, for whom learning the language of the colonizers was the only way to achieve social mobility³²

²⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 22.

²⁸ Moosavinia, Niazi, and Ghaforian, “Edward Said’s Orientalism,” 105.

²⁹ *Idib*.

³⁰ Devon Hodges, “Frankenstein and the Feminine Subversion of the Novel,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 1983): 160.

³¹ John Bugg, ““Master of their language”: Education and Exile in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,” in *Huntington Library Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (December 2005): 661-662.

³² Bugg, “Master of their language”, 660.

³³. Bugg has also referred to how the mastery of human language only serves to emphasise just how much of an outsider the Creature is³⁴. When learning the language of the De Lacey's, some of the first words the Creature learns are the names of the children and words such as 'brother' and 'sister'. On learning those words he says: "I cannot describe the delight I felt when I learned the ideas appropriated to each of these sounds and was able to pronounce them"³⁵. The Creature's first encounter with language goes hand-in-hand with him learning of affectionate relationships, and as he masters language these types of relationships become more and more desirable to him, but at the same time he starts to learn just how much of an outsider he is and, therefore, how unattainable those types of relationships are.

James Heffernan describes the Creature's physical appearance as the thing that robs him of any sympathy³⁶: everyone is so repulsed by his appearance that they would never consider getting to know him. The Creature, unable to connect with people due to his appearance, turns to language. The Creature sees voice as his only way to form human connections. When The Creature tries to approach the De Lacey family his plan is to first talk to the blind father. The Creature's reasoning for this is that, since the father is blind, the only basis on which he can judge the Creature is his voice: "I had sagacity enough to discover that the unnatural hideousness of my person was the chief object of horror with those who had formerly beheld me. My voice, although harsh, had nothing terrible in it"³⁷. Voice creates a social personae, and The Creature wants to use this to change how he is perceived by others. Voice becomes a

³³ Patricia Ronan. "English in Ireland: Intra-territorial Perspectives on Language Contact." In *Modelling World Englishes: A Joint Approach to Postcolonial and Non-Postcolonial Varieties*, edited by Buschfeld Sarah and Kautzsch Alexander, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 327.

³⁴ Bugg, "Master of their language", 659.

³⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 77.

³⁶ James A. W. Heffernan, "Looking at the Monster: *Frankenstein* and Film," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 136.

³⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 92.

tool of power for him, and it is arguably the only way for The Creature to create a place for himself in society. The Creature's awareness of how he can use voice is echoed in the scene where he and Victor meet each other on Mont Blanc. When Victor, repulsed by The Creature's appearance, refuses to listen to what he has to say, The Creature places his hands over Victor's eyes and says: "thus I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Still thou canst listen to me and grant me thy compassion"³⁸. The Creature's voice being what grants him sympathy is not only present within the novel. It has become a well known saying by now that "knowledge is knowing that Frankenstein is not the monster, wisdom is knowing that Frankenstein is the monster"³⁹. James Heffernan has suggested that the reason why the reader might find it easy to sympathise with the Creature is that his physical appearance does not exist for the reader: "in the novel, the words of the creature - especially as we read his autobiographical story - cover our eyes, and our blindness to his appearance is precisely what enables us to see his invisible nobility"⁴⁰. The reader is able to see the Creature, not as the monstrous Other, but as a creature that has been driven to violence by the cruel treatment of a society that sees him as nothing but a violent savage.

Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine, my joints more supple. But I will not be tempted to set myself in opposition to thee. I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me. Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency

³⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 69.

³⁹ Source unknown.

⁴⁰ Heffernan, "Looking at the Monster", 141.

and affection, is most due. [...] Will no entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion? Believe me, Frankenstein, I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow creatures, who owe me nothing? They spurn and hate me. [...] If the multitude of mankind knew of my existence, they would do as you do, and arm themselves for my destruction. Shall I not then hate them who abhor me?⁴¹

In this passage the Creature points out that he does not wish to paint himself in opposition to Victor. Even if Victor chooses to look at him as a dark reflection, the Creature refuses to see himself as being inferior, for he knows that he is not deserving of being seen that way. Throughout the novel *The Creature* shows remarkable intelligence, both through being able to teach himself to read and speak in different languages as well as his general eloquence. The reader, not being limited by his appearance, is able to see the Creature as “a verbal creation, he is the very opposite of the monstrous: he is a sympathetic and persuasive participant in Western culture”⁴².

Even those who hate him most, Victor and Walton, acknowledge the Creature’s use of voice and how it leads to him gaining some form of respect and sympathy. Victor, upon having heard the Creature’s tale, remarks that “his words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him and sometimes felt a wish to console him, but when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked,

⁴¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 68-69.

⁴² Peter Brooks. “What Is a Monster? (According to Frankenstein),” in *Body Work : Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass : Harvard University Press. 1993), 202.

my heart sickened and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred”⁴³. The same thing happens at the end of the novel. Walton is horrified by the Creature, but finds himself “at first touched by the expressions of his misery; yet, when I called to mind what Frankenstein had said of his powers of eloquence and persuasion, and when I again cast my eyes on the lifeless form of my friend, indignation was rekindled within me”⁴⁴. Here, Walton shows an awareness of the Creature using voice, a social personae constructed through language, and it angers him. Walton feels sympathy for the Creature because he speaks in a way that is in accordance with the educated European man, but Walton realises that at the end of the day, the Creature is still not quite human. In the words of Hodges: “The monster cannot be trusted because, though he ably performs in an alien language, he never fully inhabits it. As a result, his language always seems to be a disguise for something terrifying that remains unspoken”⁴⁵.

The importance of language when it comes to forming a social personae is also emphasised by the Creature when he speaks to Walton:

*You, who call Frankenstein your friend, seem to have a knowledge of my crimes and his misfortunes. But in the detail which he gave you of them he could not sum up the hours and months of misery which I endured wasting in impotent passions*⁴⁶.

Victor, the one most tormented by the Creature, has been the one telling his story. The narrative Walton has received can therefore said to be inherently biased. As Devon

⁴³ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 103.

⁴⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 159.

⁴⁵ Hodges, “Frankenstein”, 160.

⁴⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 160.

Hodges describes the Creature: “his monstrousness is projected on him. The monster represents, as we have seen, the limits of Frankenstein's own knowledge. But this is precisely what Frankenstein does not want to admit”⁴⁷.

The tragedy of the Creature comes from the lack of agency he has. The Creature shows himself as being remarkably intelligent and well-spoken: he learns language from listening to the De Lacey’s and reading, and despite having no formal education his manner of speech is more eloquent than that of his creator. The Creature knows how to utilise voice to his advantage and he should be able to use his agency, but his appearance dissuades people from listening to him. The Creature is an example of how agency is not just having the capacity to act, but also being believed to be able to exercise agency by society. His physical features made it impossible for the Creature to utilise voice to convince others of his agency, and so he made others face his capacity to act through increasing acts of violence: if the world would not listen to him, he would make them listen. The Creature goes from the one being ignored to the one being Victor cannot possibly ignore: “he had promised to follow me wherever I might go”⁴⁸. This reversal of the power dynamic has been looked at by John Bugg, who observes that after decided to seize power, the Creature addresses Victor as a slave⁴⁹:

Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself

⁴⁷ Hodges, “Frankenstein”, 161.

⁴⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 109.

⁴⁹ Bugg, “Master of their language”, 664.

*miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!*⁵⁰.

This passage occurs when the Creature confronts Victor about his refusal to make a female Creature, and it marks the beginning of their role reversal. Before this moment, as stated by the Creature, there was still the possibility of negotiation between the two. Now that Victor has shown himself to be both unreliable and of no further use for the Creature, for he refuses to create a partner for him, the Creature forsakes all niceties and starts his vengeance quest. The Creature, denied of the only thing he ever asked for, decided to make Victor suffer the same pain he has suffered, and kills Clerval and Elizabeth. In the words of Devon Hodges: “Victor Frankenstein, the bearer of the qualities of god-like power and knowledge that characterize the masculine position in culture, discovers the limits of his mastery”⁵¹.

Elizabeth and the Feminine presence

At the end of the 18th century the Gothic genre was one in which the central female was both a victim and heroic. Ellen Moers describes *Frankenstein* as being a major turning point for the Gothic tradition: “Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, in 1818, made over the Gothic novel into what today we call science fiction. Frankenstein brought a new sophistication to literary terror, and it did so without a heroine, without even an important female victim”⁵². While it is true that *Frankenstein* lacks a heroine, the novel most certainly has important female victims. There are three women that die in

⁵⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 120.

⁵¹ Devon Hodges, “Frankenstein and the Feminine Subversion of the Novel,” *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 1983): 159.

⁵² Ellen Moers, “Female Gothic: The Monster’s Mother,” *The New York Review*, March 21, 1974, 3.

the novel: Caroline Beaufort-Frankenstein, Justine Mortiz, and Elizabeth Lavenza. Caroline Beaufort-Frankenstein is Victor's late mother who died shortly before the events of the main story. Elizabeth became ill with scarlet fever, and Caroline decided to take care of her despite the risk to her own health.

*During [Elizabeth's] illness many arguments had been urged to persuade my mother to refrain from attending upon her. She had at first yielded to our entreaties, but when she heard that the life of her favourite was menaced, she could no longer control her anxiety*⁵³.

Caroline contracts scarlet fever herself, and while Elizabeth makes a full recovery, Caroline dies after three days, a death she herself has made peace with⁵⁴. Caroline has a relatively small part in the story, but what is said about her makes it clear that she was the typical good housewife that devoted her life – and death – to caring for her family. Her death places Elizabeth at the centre of the household. Her dying wish is for Elizabeth and Victor to marry and she tells Elizabeth to become a mother-figure for the younger children: “Elizabeth, my love, you must supply my place to your younger cousins”⁵⁵.

Justine Moritz is the second woman who dies. In contrast to Caroline, who could be said to be a victim of the social ideals placed upon women and mothers, Justine is a victim of Victor's direct actions. She is an innocent woman sentenced to death for the crimes of the Creature and her death forces Victor to face what he has done. When Victor learns of the death of William at the hands of the Creature, he is still able to maintain some sense level of distance. The Creature killed William

⁵³ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 25.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

because of his relation to his creator. William died because of an unfortunate chance encounter, and although Victor blames himself for it, is not directly responsible nor was he in a position that would have allowed him to prevent what happened to his brother. At Justine's trial he recounts: "Could the demon who had (I did not for a minute doubt) murdered my brother also in his hellish sport have betrayed the innocent to death and ignominy?"⁵⁶, the phrasing of which indicated he holds the Creature accountable for William's death and not himself. The death of Justine, on the other hand, is the first instance of Victor blaming himself. When Justine's trial comes to an end and Victor realises she is going to be found guilty the passage reads: "I could not sustain the horror of my situation, and when I perceived that the popular voice and the countenances of the judges had already condemned my unhappy victim, I rushed out of the court in agony"⁵⁷, emphasising that Victor is the one responsible for Justine's death.

The last woman to die is Elizabeth, and her death marks the end of Victor's life. After the deaths of William, Justine, and Clerval, Victor was very distraught but he was still able to live his life. Elizabeth's death, however, is described as "A fiend had snatched from me every hope of future happiness"⁵⁸. Her death is what kills Victor's father and in a way Victor himself, for he remarks: "What then became of me? I know not; I lost sensation, and chains and darkness were the only objects that pressed upon me"⁵⁹. After Elizabeth's death, Victor spends the rest of his life chasing the Creature, a hopeless battle which eventually leads to his death. Similar to how the death of Elizabeth robbing Victor of his hope for the future, the destruction of the

⁵⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 56.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 142.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

female Creature is also described as marking the end of the Creature's future happiness: "Shall each man," cried he, "find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone?"⁶⁰

Both Caroline and Elizabeth fit the eighteenth century ideal for women. In this era "the image of the disorderly woman is replaced by the image of the chaste maiden and obedient wife"⁶¹. A good woman embodied "the traditional pieties of religion, the family, and even the state"⁶². Caroline's death makes her a martyr: she was to take care of her daughter even if it killed her. Elizabeth dies on her wedding night, which allows her to remain the pure and chaste maiden she was throughout the novel. The first description of Elizabeth in the 1831 edition is that of an angelic creature, "a child fairer than a pictured cherub—a creature who seemed to shed radiance from her looks and whose form and motions were lighter than the chamois of the hills"⁶³. This plays into the traditional image of the woman as the angel of the household. Throughout the novel, Elizabeth is portrayed as being the perfect wife. She loves her future husband dearly, cares for the family, and she is intelligent. She is gentle and docile and appears to be the ideal wife and daughter. Since there is no insight into the thought processes of these characters their voice has to be judged based on what they say and do in Victor's presence, and it is hard to say whether this is authentic to who they are or if this is a social personae. It is easier to look at Elizabeth's agency, since it is her (believed) capacity to act. The most prominent scene of Elizabeth's agency is Justine's trial.

⁶⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 119.

⁶¹ Marlene LeGates, "The Cult of Womanhood in the Eighteenth-Century Thought," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Autumn, 1976), 23.

⁶² LeGates, "Cult of Womanhood," 29.

⁶³ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, "*Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus (the 1831 Text)*," in *Frankenstein*, ed. Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin Classics), 27.

Several witnesses were called who had known her for many years, and they spoke well of her; but fear and hatred of the crime of which they supposed her guilty rendered them timorous and unwilling to come forward. Elizabeth saw even this last resource, her excellent dispositions and irreproachable conduct, about to fail the accused, when, although violently agitated, she desired permission to address the court⁶⁴.

In being the only one to dare speak up in Justine's defence, Elizabeth challenges what Devon Hodges describes as "the traditional opposition of masculine and feminine, speech and silence" in which "speech is associated with masculinity [...] and a woman must lose her identity in order to make self-expression possible"⁶⁵. In a patriarchal culture, the female voice is silenced⁶⁶. Elizabeth speaks up at the trial, which could be seen as a defiance of the patriarchy, but in the end her speech is only seen as an example of her kind generosity and is not taken as a legitimate argument for Justine's innocence. Elizabeth's attempt at saving her friend was unsuccessful because of the system that only wants to see her in the light of being the ideal woman, not because she did not attempt to make use of her agency. Elizabeth's agency is constrained by the society in which she is situated. Devon Hodges describes women in a patriarchal society as: "the woman in a patriarchal society is defined as an absence, an enigma, mystery, or crime, or she is allowed to be a presence only so that she can be defined as a lack, a mutilated body that must be repressed to enable men to join the symbolic order and maintain their mastery"⁶⁷. This is the fate of the women in the novel. Caroline Beaufort-Frankenstein is defined by her absence. Justine is the

⁶⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 56.

⁶⁵ Hodges, "Frankenstein," 157.

⁶⁶ Hodges, "Frankenstein," 156.

⁶⁷ Devon Hodges, "Frankenstein and the Feminine Subversion of the Novel," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 1983): 162.

one found guilty of a crime she did not commit. Elizabeth, who is both sensitive and put-together in the face of tragedy, is rarely understood by Victor and eventually dies because of him. And the female Creature is mutilated and destroyed before she could ever come into existence.

Victor's abandonment of the Creature had been described as being akin a mother revolting against her baby⁶⁸. Fred Randel sees Victor's workplace as being "unmistakably linked to the female reproductive system"⁶⁹. He points at the negative and crude language that is used to describe it – "in a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a gallery and staircase, I kept my workshop of filthy creation"⁷⁰ – and connects this to Shelley's own experiences with childbirth⁷¹. Her mother died when she was born, and she herself lost her infant child. Randel also describes Victor's workplace as being removed from women: the only people who ever set foot there are Victor and Clerval, and there is no indication of Victor being in contact with any women while residing in Ingolstadt⁷². For Randal, Victor's mental and physical distance from the feminine is what causes his downfall: the workspace feels unnatural because of the absence of femininity and "the monster's very monstrosity is the mark and consequence of his severance from femininity"⁷³. These beliefs can also be found in the work of Anne Mellor. Mellor, in drawing a comparison between the creation of the Creature by Victor and the creation of life by women, describes Victor's experiment as something

⁶⁸ Moers, "Female Gothic," 5.

⁶⁹ Fred V. Randel, "'Frankenstein', Feminism, and the Intertextuality of Mountains," *Studies in Romanticism* 23, no. 4 (1984): 530.

⁷⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 34.

⁷¹ Randel, "Frankenstein," 530.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Randel, "Frankenstein," 531.

that “supports a patriarchal denial of the value of women and of female sexuality”⁷⁴. When applying this in the context of agency once can look at the creation of new life as being reserved for womenⁱ, it is the one thing men cannot do. The creation of the Creature can be seen as a man trying to gain agency where men cannot have it. On Victor’s exclusion of women and femininity in his life and work, Randel writes that “femininity is a norm, not just a source. No mode of knowledge, no human activity, can be adequate which excludes it”⁷⁵. Describing femininity as a norm in as interesting choice. The feminine tends to be placed on the periphery and is seen as the Other when compared to the masculine. By emphasising the importance of the feminine presence there is a certain power given to the feminine.

Mellor attributes Victor’s experiment and the tragedies that follow as the result of a society that values the separation of the male and female spheres⁷⁶. Hodges explains that in the early nineteenth century there was a separation between the economic, male sphere and the domestic, female sphere⁷⁷. This female domestic sphere was primarily defined by men, despite it being a place for the women⁷⁸. What does this mean for the agency of women? Agency is held by those who society believes have the ability to exercise their agency. Women have the same capacity to act as men, but are not believed to be able to exercise this agency in the way men do. In the novel this limitation of the female can be seen through Elizabeth. She is adopted into the Frankenstein family because of Alphonse. When Victor goes to university in Ingolstadt she has to stay at home to fulfil the role of the woman of the

⁷⁴ Anne K. Mellor, “Possessing Nature: The Female in *Frankenstein*,” *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 2.

⁷⁵ Randel, “Frankenstein,” 531.

⁷⁶ Mellor, “Possessing Nature,” 3.

⁷⁷ Hodges, “Frankenstein,” 155.

⁷⁸ Hodges, “Frankenstein,” 160.

house due to the absence of Caroline, and when Victor departs for Ingolstadt again shortly before their marriage she is once again left behind. They are of similar social and economic class, but where Victor has the freedom to do whatever he desires, Elizabeth is confined to the family home by a looming sense of responsibility and duty. Mellor sees the division between emotional and intellectual activity, which is caused by the women being confined to working at home and the men constantly being away from home, as what ultimately causes Victor's demise⁷⁹. Victor never considers what might become of his creation once it is alive, and once it comes to life he immediately rejects it, not once showing the Creature empathy or understanding. The women in the novel take responsibility: Elizabeth takes over as the mother of the household, Justine confesses and takes on the blame of a murder she did not commit, and Agatha takes care of her elderly father. Victor does not take responsibility for his creation. The women staying at home in accordance with the 19th century ideal for (British) women. Cathy Ross writes: "the ideal Anglo-American woman of the 19th century was to be pious, pure and domesticated - able to present her home as a model of pious domesticity and a spiritual haven from a materialist world. The "proper" sphere of women was to be in the home while men were to be in the world"⁸⁰.

Mellor has also taken the separation of the domestic and public spheres as being responsible for the death of the women in the novel, describes Elizabeth's testimony in favour of Justine going unheard as the result of women not being able to "function effectively in the public realm"⁸¹. Another female death resulting from this would be that of the female creature, who is destroyed because Victor fears that he

⁷⁹ Mellor, "Possessing Nature," 3.

⁸⁰ Cathy Ross, "Separate Spheres or Shared Dominions?," *Transformation* 23, no. 4 (October 2006), 228.

⁸¹ Mellor, "Possessing Nature," 3.

nor the Creature will be able to control her: “she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation.”⁸². The female Creature would, like her male counterpart, belong to neither the public or private sphere. She would be able to do whatever she wanted. Mellor has attributed Victor’s fear of the female Creature to her being a woman that defies all conventions of what a woman should be or should be able to do. Unlike the other women in the novel, she would have a lot of agency. The only reason the women in the novel do not have agency is because society does not believe they can have it. The female Creature, like her male counterpart, will be physically superior to all others, making society see and believe that she can exercise her agency. She has also not grown up in a patriarchal society, meaning she herself will be sure of her own capacity to act. Mellor explains that the female Creature had to be destroyed in order for the power structure to stay intact, for “uninhibited female sexual experience threatens the very foundation of patriarchal power”⁸³.

Deconstructing Victor Frankenstein

After looking at the Creature and Elizabeth’s in relation to Victor, it is only fitting to take a brief look at Victor Frankenstein himself. In regards to voice, it is easy to see that Victor uses it in a similar way as the Creature. There are numerous opportunities for Victor to inform those around him of what he had done, but in the end the only person he tells about the Creature is Robert Walton. Walton had no connection to Victor prior to rescuing him from the ice, and at this point Victor has nothing left to

⁸² Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 118-119.

⁸³ Mellor, “Possessing Nature, 7.

lose. He has lost both of his parents, William, Justine, Clerval and Elizabeth, and he is chasing the Creature in what could rightfully be called a suicide mission. With Walton, Victor no longer tries to keep up a personae. This contrasts with Victor's interactions with his family and Clerval. He never told them what he had done, and thus he was able to keep up the personae of the good son and friend he had once been.

Victor's early emotional distance from his own actions has been commented on by Randal: when Victor works on the Creature he is consumed by intellectual power and scientific progress, which causes him to stop writing to his family or maintain any other form of social contact⁸⁴. "What he suppresses in himself are traits traditionally allied with femininity, and it is these absences which lead to his crucial blunders as a scientific creator"⁸⁵. The death of William shows the different levels of responsibility taken by the characters. When the family finds out that William has been murdered, Elizabeth insists on seeing the body.

*Elizabeth was very earnest to see the corpse. At first [Alphonse] attempted to prevent her but she persisted, and entering the room where it lay, hastily examined the neck of the victim, and clasping her hands exclaimed, 'O God! I have murdered my darling child!'*⁸⁶.

The only thing Elizabeth did was allow William to wear a locket. Since the locket is not found with the body, she assumes that it was somehow the reason for him getting killed. Victor is saddened by his brother's death, but does not immediately blame himself. It has been two years since he created and abandoned the Creature⁸⁷, and

⁸⁴ Randal, "Frankenstein," 530-531.

⁸⁵ Randal, "Frankenstein," 531.

⁸⁶ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 47.

⁸⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 50.

because this scene takes place prior to the Creature and Victor reuniting on Mont Blanc Victor is not yet aware that he is responsible for the Creature having resorted to violence.

Victor's agency goes through an interesting development. At the beginning of the story he is able to do everything, even creating new life. He starts out with arguably the most agency, but after the Creature starts seeing him and the enemy, Victor loses his position of power and he ends the story with little to no agency. Everything he does is defined by the Creature⁸⁸. Victor himself shows an awareness of this fact. Before he starts telling Walton his story he says to him:

*I thank you, for your sympathy, but it is useless; my fate is nearly fulfilled.
I wait but for one event, and then I shall repose in peace. [...] nothing can
alter my destiny; listen to my history, and you will perceive how
irrevocably it is determined.*⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Bugg, "Master of their language", 664.

⁸⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein: 1818*, 18.

Conclusion

The Creature shows how voice can be used to form social connections: upon realising his physicality makes people wary of him, he attempts to form social bonds through the use of voice. Language becomes his way of establishing himself as something other than the monster people see him as. When this fails, and he is rejected again and again, the Creature comes to realise that his body prohibits him from properly establishing a social personae. He then starts to utilise his physical superiority to place himself in a position of power in relation to a system meant to keep him from having power. The Creature is able to gain agency for himself and diminish the agency of his creator. The women in the story are restricted in their agency by the societal expectations placed upon them. Nineteenth century women were meant to be the image of domesticity and their duty to the family and household prohibited them from realising their agency. For women, voice could be used to fit in with the image of the good housewife even if this was not true to who they were. *Frankenstein* does not provide enough insight into the mindset of the female characters to establish whether or not this is a personae of their true character. *Frankenstein* shows that voice is not only reliant on the speaker but also the listener, and that agency is reliant on the social structures in place.

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ⁱ While a lot of writing refers to the ability to carry a child as being limited to women, I do feel that it is important to acknowledge that anatomy and gender identity are not the same thing. Not everyone who can carry a child identifies as a woman, and not every woman can carry a child.