

Presentation Report: A Trial Interpretation of Frankenstein From the Perspective of Feminism.

Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus is usually considered as the very first scientific novel in the world and the masterpiece that establishes Mary Shelley's fame. In a simplified version of plot summary, the whole fiction is about how a man created a monster and then everything becomes disastrous. Though Mary's initial composing drive was under Byron's call to create something to entertain themselves for time killing. However, by no means this work should be regarded as a simple entertaining story. French scholar Gayatri Spivak¹ describes *Frankenstein* as a work that has always been "mysterious". Fred Botting² claims it is "a product of criticism, not a work of literature". Feminist critics especially favor this book as their research subject and a lot of wonderful findings and interesting discoveries have been made by different strands of feminist criticism.

Following their path, this article will try to explore how Mary Shelly had her brilliant feminist ideas embodied in this marvelous work.

First, let's have a look at women's status in Mary Shelley's time. Shelley lived in the late 18th century to mid 19th century Britain. Although British culture was reaching the democracy, but women had a lot of political, economic and educational restrictions. They had little social, legal or professional position in the society. Feminists have long been aware that the woman's voice is muted in a patriarchal culture and they work hard to arouse women's self-consciousness and appeal for equal rights. So is Mary Shelley.

Second let's have a comparatively wider picture of the novel. The story is set in the late 1700s and is told through a series of letters from an arctic explorer, Robert Walton, to his sister. Robert found Frankenstein on an unexpected occasion and listened to his story. Then the narrator is changed to Frankenstein. He talked about his sweet childhood experience of growing up in Geneva, his suffering of mother's death before going to university where he became obsessed with his career of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter and how he freaked out and abandoned his ugly creature when it first came to life. As the plot continues, the narrator is changed to the monster, the creature of Frankenstein. He accused his creator of not taking the responsibility to take care of him and he wishes to have a female companion as compensation. After being declined by Frankenstein, he avenged himself on his creator by killing Frankenstein's brother, wife and best friend. In the end, Frankenstein also died and the monster he created became disillusioned and claimed to commit suicide. Shelly used an interesting narrative structure, which includes three layers: Walton's story, Frankenstein's, and the monster's. One narrator's story is told within framework of another narrator's story. Both Frankenstein's and the creature's narratives are embedded in Walton's narratives. By exploring the narrative structure of *Frankenstein*, the following features can be summarized:

Firstly, the narrative structure is characterized by the epistolary style.

Secondly, the narrative structure is heavily male dominated. Female characters

¹ Spivak, G. C. (1985). Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism. *Critical Inquiry*. (12). 254 – 258.

² Botting, F. (Ed). (1995). *Frankenstein/Mary Shelley*. New York: St. Martin.

discourse is very marginalized and peripheral. Robert Walton writes to his sister Margaret Savvile, but no clues about her writing back can be found. She remains mute in communication with Walton. Also, the descriptions of all female characters are very limited in this fiction.

Thirdly, using different narrators to narrate the same story gives the readers a complicated and confusing effect and a sense of mystery, for the three narrators' perspectives are so different. By the presence of three narrators and the shifts of their narrative tones, the reliability of male narrators' narrative is subverted.

So, Mary uses the specific male-dominated narratives to represent the reality of society on purpose and at the same time, criticize it implicitly. Though she is a writer, she is also a female. What she writes or says has limited influence on the patriarchal society she lives. She can't express her feminist standpoints blatantly. Theoretically she can, but the risk is high: those patriarchal writers or critics may attack, devalue, even "bury" her novel once they find it a feminist work, in which case, she can't get her ideas heard by more readers. So, she must obey the literary traditions. The use of the epistolary style, male narrators, and the first-person narration in *Frankenstein* are conventions for female writers of her time, it also serves as a perfect disguise of her female identity. In fact, when the book was first published, it was published anonymously. The brilliant part is that Mary Shelley knows how to follow the literary rules to construct the male-dominated narration. She skillfully and deliberately uses multiple narrators to subvert the reliability of male narrators' narration as well as the male dominated culture. As a result, her rich, novel and courageous voice does get heard and appreciated.

To be more specific, the novel's narrative structure imparts two layers of meanings. One is to present the society's conception of women, and the other is to present the significance of women's roles.

Society's Conception of Women

One of the most important ideas of feminist criticism is the criticism of the patriarchal ideology. Most feminists believe that our culture is a patriarchal culture. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley construct her novel in favor of the interests of men. She adopts the epistolary style and male-dominated narrative to match the literary convention of constructing the male-dominated narration. Apart from these writing techniques, the conception of women that male narrators present in the fiction also follows the social conception of women. Percy Shelley declares that the text functions to show the virtue of the domestic sphere--a place for women that has been largely defined by men³. I will use some examples from the novel to illustrate how women are conceptualized from the male narrator's narratives.

To begin with, all the female characters in *Frankenstein* are gentle and virtuous. They are content with their roles of being the perfect mother, pretty girlfriend or pious and obedient maid. They are the angels in the eyes of men. In addition, or to be more accurate, they are also gadgets to men. They are properties to their fathers, husbands and sons. That's the reason why female characters are constantly described in terms of

³ Quoted from Devon, H. (1983). *Frankenstein and the Feminine Subversion of the Novel*. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*. (2). 155-164.

their appearance, not intelligence. For in men's eyes, "angles" need to be pretty and "objects" do not need to have intelligently or spiritually features. Not only did men or society see them as "angles" and "objects", so did women themselves. Take Frankenstein's mother, Caroline as an example. She is a good daughter who nurses her dying father with the greatest tenderness; a good wife and companion to her husband; a self-sacrificing and tendering mother who takes good of her children; a perfect model worshipped by Justine and Elizabeth. She has no personal desire, she dedicated herself to her father, husband, son and everyone around her. In both male and female's eyes, she is flawless. However, being such a flawless character, here is what she said when she was about to introduce Elizabeth to her son, Victor: "On the evening previous to her being brought to my home, my mother had said playfully, "I have a pretty **present** for my Victor—tomorrow he shall have **it**" (1831 edition). Failing to realize any inappropriate, she uses "it" and "present" to refer to Elizabeth and sees her as a gift to her son. Not to mention the prevailing view from men that women are properties they own. Here is what happens next in Frankenstein's narrative: "And when, on the morrow, she presented Elizabeth to me as her promised gift, I, with childish seriousness, interpreted her words literally and looked upon Elizabeth as mine-- mine to protect, love and cherish. All praises bestowed on her I received as made to a possession of my own" (1381 edition). See, claiming that his view is influenced by his mom, he sees Elizabeth as his personal belonging. Even other people's praise on her, he would claim ownership. "Angles" and the objectivization of women exist throughout this text. However, there is one exception, Safie. She is a most distinct female character in *Frankenstein*. By her strong will, Safie successfully escapes from the patriarchal confinement and then has her freedom, love and happiness. She is not seen as an "object" that could be controlled; she is also aware of her own consciousness and demands the right of receiving education, of owning her freedom, and right of having happiness. The fate of angles are victims, the fate of the "free soul" is happiness. In my opinion Mary Shelley's message is clear--it is important for a woman to realize her situation and ask for the equal rights, otherwise their fates are doomed in the control of selfish, anti-empathetic men.

Significance of Women's Roles

Though the fiction uses large amount of words to describe male's outlook, feelings and observations. The implicit importance of marginalized female characters cannot be ignored. Being "invisible" and "unheard", however they play a significant role in society. Let's analyze one interesting character, the never-showed-up character, Margaret Saville. As mentioned earlier, she only exists in the account of Walton's. She is a silent listener and never makes her voice heard by replying letters. However, literally, without her, Walton would find no one to share his feelings and thoughts with. As a possible result, we, the readers, may never get the chance to read the story. In that sense, we are all indebted to the existence of Margaret Saville. It is the "invisible" and "mute" female that makes everything possible. Plus, I would not regard it as a coincidence that the abbreviation of Margaret Saville is the same as Mary Shelley. In this regard, this is a bonus scene.

In the fiction, another important role of women represented is the role of mother.

For Frankenstein, the death of his mother is a heavy blow for him, which influences his life and career. Besides that, from his experience as the mother of the creature, Mary Shelley criticizes Victor's ambition and action. She highlights the women's specialty and uniqueness of giving a birth and nurturing the child. For the creature, as a discarded child, he seeks the maternal love in his entire life. His appeals for the love from the mother are impressive. He focuses on the mother's nursing and nurturing. The motherhood is main theme that *Frankenstein* reveals. For example, the death of Frankenstein's mother is a big blow to him. He wishes to gain the love from her tender mother, and however, to quote his own words, "when the lapse of time proves the reality of the evil, then the actual bitterness of grief commences" (Shelley 29). The reality that he cannot bring his mother into life makes his life be filled up with deep sorrow. He believes his life will be grieved without his mother. After taking a short rest, Frankenstein leave of all his friends, and then takes his journey to university. However, "my speedy departure depressed our spirits" (Shelley 29). In reality, Frankenstein never recovers from the death of his mother—bitterness of grief is embedded in his minds that has an impact on his mental health. Also, what is revealed in this fiction is that mother's care and nursing is very vital for a child. In novel, Frankenstein usurps a mother's ability to create a new creature. From the aspect that mother gives birth to a new life, he is the "mother" of the creature and the creature is the child of him. After giving the life to the creature, he doesn't carry out his task as a mother to nurse and educate his child. As a mother, Frankenstein should be accused. It is just the lacking of mother's care and love for the monster that leads to the destruction of everything.

In my view, what Mary does in *Frankenstein* is that she is trying to expose the patriarchal oppression, confinement, and treatment on women in an implicit way. Her female consciousness is revealed in her novels by adopting such a unique narrative structure which imparts meaning in two aspects. One is to present society's conception of women; the other is Mary Shelley's female consciousness of highlighting the significance of women's role. Her faithful representation of a patriarchal society, in which women's voice is missing and women's role is unimportant, makes one implicit but important message: if a society were to progress and to avoid the doomed fate, actions must be taken. Women should be seen equally as men and their importance should be realized. Otherwise, in a morbid, ridiculous and paradoxical society, like *Frankenstein's* world, not only women are the sufferers, men in that society suffer too.