

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein
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Lecture 13

Feminine Silence and Marginality

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Week 3: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

LECTURE 3C: FEMININE SILENCE AND MARGINALITY.

LECTURE BY DR DIVYA A. DOHSS, IIT MADRAS



Hello, and welcome to this week's lecture on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In today's session, I would like to discuss the idea of feminine silence and marginality in relation to this novel.

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Percy Shelley's Preface to *Frankenstein*

'seeks to elevate *Frankenstein* above the other novelistic products on offer at the time:

"I am by no means indifferent to the manner in which whatever moral tendencies exist in the sentiments or characters it contains shall affect the reader; yet my chief concern in this respect has been limited to the avoiding the enervating effects of the novels of the present day, and to the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue".

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.104)



In this session, it would be ideal to talk about feminine silence in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* by first talking about Percy Shelley's preface to the 1818 edition of this novel.

In this, preface, one of the aims of Percy Shelley seems to be to elevate Frankenstein above other novelistic products on offer at the time. So he seems to be arguing that this novel seems to be offering something unique, when it is compared to other novels produced at that time.


He says, I quote, "I am by no means indifferent to the manner in which whatever moral tendencies exist in the sentiments or characters it contains shall affect the reader; yet my chief concern in this respect has been limited to the avoiding, the enervating effects of the novels of the present day, and to the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue."

So what Percy is arguing for here in the preface to Mary's novel is that, that this novel is offering the amiableness of domestic affection. It is portraying the wonderful nature of domesticity and that it is representing the triumph of good over evil and that it is kind of projecting the need for universal virtue. So you can see that in this comment, at least there is no reference to the idea of the gothic, it is portrayed as a novel which speaks for the idea of universal common goodness against its opposite, the contrary in this world.

So, and you can also see how he is talking about the enervating effects of the novels which have detrimental effects, negative effects on the readers, which were being produced at the same time as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Further it is significant to note that, Shelly is stating that he is aware of the fact that sentiment of, sentiments and tendencies and the nature of characters in the novel will have an impact on the psyche of the reader.

So if you go back to that phrase, whatever moral tendencies existed in the sentiments of characters shall affect the reader. So the novel is a powerful object, because it has an effect on the reader and that Frankenstein is going to be different from the rest of the novels at the time, because of its capacity to offer the ideal set of circumstances, which can be used as a model for the readers.

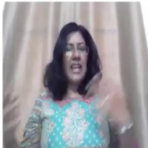

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Enervating Effects?

'The allusion to the 'enervating effects of the novels of the present day' brings to mind William Wordsworth's earlier implicit denigration of the Gothic in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads(1800) where he complained of the 'frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse' that he perceived to be contaminating literary taste in Britain'.

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.104)




So maybe talk about the enervating effects, the idea of mentioned in the preface by Percy Shelley and the critic Angela Wright, mentions that the allusion to the enervating effects of the novel present day is an avocation of what William Wordsworth's with earlier implicit denigration of the gothic in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads where he complained of the frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse that he perceived to be contaminating literary taste in Britain.

So you can see with this context in mind, the context of William Wordsworth's attack on the Gothic in his Preface to Lyrical Ballad, which is supposed to have ushered the romantic moment in Great Britain that Percy is reacting to the attack of William Wordsworth when he is writing the preface to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. So he is trying to differentiate between Mary's work and the frantic novel sickly and stupid German tragedies and extravagant stories.

So what he is trying to do is to kind of marginalise the idea of the gothic when he is categorizing Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, instead, what he projects novel to be is a kind of a statement of ideal domesticity and as showcasing the triumph of good over evil. So you can see the web of literary taste and movements and criticism that is going on as a backdrop to that preface.


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Percy Shelly's Preface

Frankenstein's 1818 Preface takes considerable care to distance itself from the Gothic form, only admitting its inspiration from the collection of German ghost stories *Fantasmagoriana* in the famous ghost story competition of the Villa Diodati in the most coyly apologetic terms with the comment that 'These tales excited in us a playful desire of imitation' (p. 4).

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.104)



Further, it is to be noted that the 1818 preface takes considerable care to distance itself from the gothic form only admitting its inspiration of the collection of German ghost stories, *Fantasmagoriana* in the famous ghost story competition of the Villa Diodati in the most coyly apologetic terms with the comment that “these tales excited in us a playful desire of imitation.”

So when, Hussy is writing this preface to Mary's *Frankenstein*, he realizes that the label of the gothic might have detrimental effect in terms of the kind of criticism it might provoke from the sophisticated circles, circles to which poets such as William Wordsworth belong to.

So, he just kind of refers to the idea of the gothic in relation to the ghost stories from which this novel was inspired during that ghost story competition that we discussed at length in the previous lecture at Villa Diodati. The place where Mary Shelley started writing, got the inspiration to write *Frankenstein*.




So he just mentioned that the inspiration came from the German gothic stories, and it was a kind of a playful, a kind of a game, it is a playful desire of imitation, it is not to be taken too seriously. It was inspired by these tales, but the end product is something else. So he is kind of trying to distance *Frankenstein* from the gothic tradition, because he thinks that that is not going to be appreciated by high-brow commentators. And that gothic has its own kind of, set of responses from the higher critics out which the negativity from those critics, he does not want to be applied in relation to the assessment of *Frankenstein*.

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Shelley's Preface

The Preface concludes by moving away from this carefully encoded reference to the ghost story competition: 'The weather, however, suddenly became serene; and my two friends left me on a journey among the Alps, and lost, in the magnificent scenes which they present, all memory of their ghostly visions' (p. 4). Nature, in this Preface, trumps the light amusement of fictional creation, exorcizing the 'ghostly visions' that the male friends in the group only entertained when they were in need of indoors diversion.

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.104-105)



The preface further concludes by moving away from this carefully encoded reference to the ghost story competition. So the competition, the contest and the context for Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is kind of a recurrent. That seems to be a key moment for this origin narrative of Frankenstein, which keeps recurring when we are talking about the nature of this novel. So he refers to that origin of the moment for the birth of this novel.

I quote "the weather, however, suddenly became serene; and my two friends left me on a journey among the Alps, and lost, in the magnificent scenes which they present all memory of their ghostly visions." So, nature in this preface, trumps the light amusement of fictional creation, exorcizing the ghostly visions that the male friends of the group only entertained when they were in need of indoor diversion.

So if you look at the way the scene has been set up in the words of Shelly, he seems to be stating that, when the weather became better, we all broke up. My friends left for a trip among the Alps and the ghostly visions also disappeared with the weather becoming more conducive for outdoor exploration. So gothic and the idea of supernatural narrative seem to be associated with the indoors diversion when the weather is extremely hostile.

So it is a momentary thing that is what Percy Shelley seems to be mentioning and it just seems to be a kind of a dream which vanished when they broke. So that kind of idea is deliberately inserted in the preface in order to kind of marginalize that, very serious macabre,


ghostly ambiance of the nights, during which all the friends are sat together and talked about supernatural narrative. So that is marginalized here.

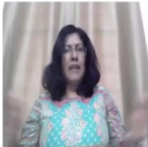
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Robert Walton

'Walton's wonder and appreciation of the beauty of the Arctic is apparent in his description. He presents it as a strange place, which Frankenstein later tells him makes it appropriate for the strange tale he will hear. Its unfamiliarity and wild beauty heighten Walton's desire to explore it. Like Frankenstein, Walton celebrates the majesty and power of nature in his description of it.'

Source: https://www.cambridge.org/978052154952056/GCSE_English_Literature_for_AQA_Frankenstein_Teachers_Resource_Free_Online.pdf


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I want to connect that idea with Robert Walton, the Arctic explorer who rescues Victor Frankenstein when he is lost among the Arctic ways in his pursuit of the monster. So Walton is a character who kind of admires the sublimity of nature and his “wonder and appreciation of the beauty of the Arctic is apparent in his description of the scenery that he witnesses. He presents it as a strange place, which Frankenstein later tells him, makes it appropriate for the strange tale he will hear. Its unfamiliarity and wild beauty heightened Walton's desire to explore it. Like Frankenstein, Walton celebrates the majesty and the power of nature in his description of it.”

So Walton's appreciation of nature is crucial. It is crucial because it brings in the idea of sublime nature, nature which is beautiful at the same time and awe inspiring, striking a kind of strange fear in the person who is witnessing it. And secondly, Frankenstein relates to Walton's admiration appreciation of nature, the sublimity of nature and says that this setting is perfect for him, for Victor to relate the story, the strange and bizarre story of how he created the monster, which is kind of wreaking vengeance on him and his family.

So the unfamiliarity and the wild beauty is related to the strange tale of Frankenstein and that relationship is crucial to the idea of the gothic and its discussions for this novel. And it also kind of takes us back to that discussions of the friends in Villa Diodati and their sitting in

inclement weather. So that pattern keeps recurring the reality and the fiction is kind of overlapping in the narrativization of Frankenstein's story.

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Silence of the Female

The silence of the female author of *Frankenstein* in the 1818 Preface is echoed uncannily in the very framework of the tale. It begins with a series of four letters, addressed from the explorer Robert Walton to the silent addressee Mrs Saville.

Source: (Argita Wright 2018, p.105)



Now the female is largely silent in the story of Frankenstein and the silence of the female author of Frankenstein in the 1818 reface is echoed uncannily in the very framework of the tale. So Mary Shelly is not writing a preface, it is her husband Percy, who is writing a preface in 1818, and the novel itself begins as a series of four letters addressed from the explorer Robert Walton to the silent addressee Mrs. Saville, Mrs. Margaret Saville, MS is the initials used in the novel as well.


So, both the female author was silent and there are no major female characters in the novel as well. Of course there are characters, but they do not play any great part in the way events unfold, Elizabeth Lavenza dies, Justine dies. So you can see that large share of the actions are performed are in relation to the male characters.


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Silence of the Female

'We learn in the second sentence of the novel, and of Letter I, that Mrs Saville is Walton's 'dear sister' but only after Walton has mentioned in his opening sentence that this addressee has regarded his enterprise 'with such evil forebodings'.

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.105)





We learn in the second sentence of the novel and from the first letter that Mrs. Saville is Walton's dear sister, but only after Walton has mentioned it in his opening sentence that this addressee has regarded his enterprise with such evil forebodings. So not only is the female silent, the female is also not very appreciative or the female does not have very high regard for the enterprise on which Robert Walton is embarked on. She looks at it with evil forebodings, as with anticipation of things going bad for this project. So you can see a particular kind of characterization evolving from the silence to the way the female judges the male adventure project.

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Silence of the Female

Walton wills her to feel and think: 'you cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation', Walton pleads at one point; further on in Letter I, he tries to convince himself of the merit of his enterprise with 'And now, dear Margaret, do I not deserve to accomplish some great purpose'Mrs Saville remains silent throughout *Frankenstein*

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.105)





So Walton in his letters is trying to convince her to feel and think in a more positive way and I quote, this is from the novel: “you cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation. Walton pleads at one point; further on in Letter I, he tries to convince himself the merit of his enterprise and now dear Margaret, do I not deserve to accomplish some great purpose”, but there is no answer. There is no return letter from Mrs. Saville and she remained silent throughout Frankenstein.

So while the silence of the female is important, there is also an important characteristic of Walton which emerges from these letters, which is that he desires to confer benefit of mankind. He is trying to act as the benefactor, as someone who is going to offer mankind innumerable benefits by his actions, by his explorations. And in that regard, he can be compared to Victor Frankenstein, who is trying to create this new race by first creating the monster, but we know that even that frustration becomes an act of failure and how it also destroys the second female monster that he creates. So you can see the similarity between the two and how both are related as well to the idea of the Promethean legend, which I will come to shortly in this lecture.

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The Presence of the Feminine

'Despite Shelley's deliberate marginalisation of the feminine in Frankenstein, it never vanishes from the narrative altogether ... The novel's narrative structure exposes the men's agency and their ambitious aspirations at least potentially to the judgement of a female gaze, which belongs to both the fictional reader Margaret Saville and the writer Mary Shelley'

(Source: Berthold Schoene-Harwood, 2020 p.8)

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The slide features a title 'The Presence of the Feminine' with a horizontal line underneath. Below the title is a quote in single quotes. At the bottom right of the slide is a small video inset showing a woman with dark hair wearing a light blue patterned top, gesturing with her right hand. The NPTEL logo is located in the top right corner of the slide area.


While we understand that the feminine has been suppressed and made silent, and that there is a marginalisation of the feminine in Frankenstein, we also realized that it never vanishes from the narrative altogether. It is kind of, having impact on the male heroes adventures. The novels narrative structure exposes the men's agency and the ambitious aspirations at least

potentially to the judgment of the female gaze, which belongs both to the fictional reader, Margaret Saville and the writer Mary Shelly.

So this is an important argument which suggest that while the feminine is silent, the feminine is the judge. She is judging constantly, the adventures of the male. Robert Walton is desperate to kind of seek the approval of his sister, Margaret Saville and Margaret Saville can be a stand in for Mary Shelley herself. So MS you can see how the initials kind of could suggest either Saville or it can be a stand in for the writer herself.

So, the female gaze seems to be the ultimately significant case, and to that case, all these narratives are offered and it is also a common assumption that many of the gothic fiction were read by women rather than by the men. So you can see how ultimately the novel comes to the eyes of the female reader. So even though there is a marginalisation of the feminine, the feminine is the kind of all seeing eyes, which are kind of judging the actions of the men.


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Promethean Quest

'Walton's expositional letters demonstrate that he is not fixed in his purpose; he reminds Margaret of his earlier ambitions to create poetry, and how they have now transformed into greater quests for glory in the sea-faring life that his father explicitly denied him upon his deathbed.'


Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.106)



Walton's expositional letters demonstrate that he is not fixed in his purpose; he reminds Margaret of his early ambitions to create poetry and how they have now transformed into greater quest for glory in the sea-faring life that his father explicitly denied him upon his deathbed. So, the letters are also offering a glimpse into the kind of character that Walton is who initially wanted to become great by writing poetry, but then upon the denial of his father, he embarks on his sea-faring quest. So that kind of uncertainty as to the choice of his

profession also kind of tells you the kind of man that Walton is who does not seem to be fixed in his ambition.

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Promethean Poet

'As Anne K. Mellor has observed, like Victor Frankenstein himself, Walton is thus another Promethean poet, seeking to create a more perfect humanity by revealing a new land of fire and light to man.'

Walton provides a shadowy double of Victor Frankenstein in his Promethean quest, ambition and inattention to the safety of those around him'.

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.105)



Critic “Anne K. Mellor has observed that like Victor Frankenstein himself, Walton is thus another Promethean poet seeking to create a more perfect humanity by revealing a new line of fire and light to man. Walter provides a shadowy double of Victor Frankenstein in his Promethean quest, ambition and inattention to the safety of those around him.”

So this is a kind of a scathing criticism on Victor Frankenstein as well as on Robert Walton who seem to kind of disregard safety of those around him by embarking on dangerous escapades or adventures. So, Walton can also be a Promethean figure just as Victor Frankenstein is because Walton wants to kind of show the rest of the humanity the Northwestern passage just as Victor Frankenstein wants to kind of create a new race of creatures by his remarkable and resourceful knowledge.



So this kind of offering a new path or a new land of fire and light to mankind is dangerous and that is what Frankenstein reveals to the readers and to the men who are involved in such great enterprises.

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Prometheus

Prometheus was depicted in [Prometheus Bound](#) by [Aeschylus](#), who made him not only the bringer of fire and civilization to mortals but also their preserver, giving them all the arts and sciences as well as the means of survival.

Image source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Prometheus-Greek-god>



Now let us quickly see what Prometheus legend is about in relation to Aeschylus, who wrote this play Prometheus Bound and Prometheus is the titan who brings the fire and civilization to mortals. So he is the bringer of light and civilization, and he is also their preserver and gives them all the arts and sciences as a means of their survival. But then he is punished for his overreaching capacity. He kind of overreaches, he oversteps the bounds of what he is supposed to and Zeus punishes him, by tying him to a rock and having an eagle eat on his liver, which seems to regenerate.

So it is a constant punishment. And if you compare this with the novel, Victor Frankenstein is kind of constantly punished, repetitively punished by having his brother die at the hands of the monster, then his best friend Henry, and then his own wife Elizabeth. So it is a series of punishments, which kind of repeatedly attacks Victor's peace of mind and well-being, and Victor himself loses his life because of this constant terror and dread and physical suffering that he undergoes because of this creature.

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Monster and Marginality

'Forced right from its inception into a posture of marginality' ... 'the creature bit by bit is forced to discover itself as a monster: its being for itself determined by the gaze of others. And so begin some of the most painful of Romantic educations, one that only a woman, a slave or a colonised subject could imagine'

Source: Meena Alexander, Women in Romanticism (Basingstoke and London Macmillan, 1989), 129.



Now I want to kind of touch on the idea of the monster and marginality from a different point of view and we need to realize that the creature which is forced right from its inception into a posture of marginality. If you remember the moment of the creature coming to life, it kind of like a child, an infant and it kind of reaches out to Victor and Victor flees. This creature bit by bit is forced to discover itself as a monster, it does not realize that it is a thing of dread that it is a horrid contrast to the rest of humanity. It is kind of being for itself, it is being as determined by the gaze of others. The others judge the kind of nature that the monster is supposed to possess. And so begin some of the most painful of romantic educations, one that only a woman, a slave or a colonised subject could imagine.

So the monster can be a symbol for all these different categories, the female, the slave and a colonised subject, because all these categories are also marginalized, oppressed and rejected by the powerful other. So it is a fantastic kind of set of interpretations that one can see through the figure of the monster.

Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.