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Frankenstein: A Critique on Masculinity

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The era of the European Enlightenment was a cultural movement of both intellectual and

philosophical ideals that reigned over Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,

influencing the rest of the globe (Schott, 471). With the birth of a newfound understanding of

reason, rationality, and objectivity, the European Enlightenment was coined as the "Age of

Reason" (Schott, 471). This epithet was designated to this period as gatherings known as

"Salons" which brought writers, artists, nobles, government officials, and other intellectuals

together. These individuals were brought together to discuss and display ideas that were against

the ideals of the royal court and in favor of the separation of church and state (Schott, 471).

Given that the main works of the Enlightenment were predominantly written by men, such as

Kant, Voltaire, and Rousseau, it is clear that this movement was perceived as a male-driven

phenomenon (Schott, 472). Being inherently masculine through means of control, the hallmark

of Enlightenment masculinity was reason, however, many female Enlightenment thinkers argued

that women were also capable of reason and morality (Schott, 472). With Enlightenment ideals

being directed towards the masculine gender, we are able to see the faults and instability of

Enlightenment masculinity through the works of the women in this time period (Schott, 473). By

analyzing the ways Mary Shelly critiques masculinity within the context of the Enlightenment

era, it is clear that her complex male characters in the novella *Frankenstein* exemplify the

inherently masculine enlightened man. These men take on the stereotypical extreme, toxic, and

control-driven masculinity that oftentimes turns violent.

Similar to how Victor constructed his creature by utilizing the ideal parts of male bodies,

this novella's parts are assembled by seemingly masculine men (Shelly, 22). Each male narrator

takes on an extreme version of masculinity in some way; each trying to "be more than men" (Shelly, 160). Framing much of the narrative by writing letters to his sister, Margaret, Robert Walton narrates from the perspective of an extremely masculine, enlightened, intrepid arctic explorer (Shelly, 3). By mentioning that he "worked harder than common sailors…devoted my nights to the study of mathematics…," it is clear that Walton is exemplifying the definition of the enlightened man (Shelly, 3). Walton's quality of striving in the name of reason, therefore, displays his Enlightenment-era masculinity as a character. This is inherently violent, as his tunnel-vision of reason has little room for any other worries, directly mirroring Victor's "pre-creature" (Shelly, 2-3).

Through Walton, the narration from Victor Frankenstein depicts his manic striving for scientific excellence as an enlightened man. This progresses into the history of his own violent relationship with his creation as a result of this desire for knowledge and control (Shelly, 33). The act of constructing the creature with the "most desired" male parts was done in order for Victor's name and creation to be the pinnacle of masculinity (Shelly, 22). His strife for masculine reason then takes a turn for violence (Shelly, 34). Victor's abandonment of his "monster" creates a cycle of guilt, anger, and destruction. First, the monster takes vengeance upon Victor, and then Victor swears vengeance on the monster (Shelly, 33). In the end, Victor resembles the monster he hates far more than he would care to imagine, "You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been" (Shelly, 4). Victor's desire to become the pinnacle of the masculine, enlightened man ultimately leads him to pure violence (Shelly, 34).

The creature, on the other hand, is inherently masculine just by his creation. Made in eugenics fashion, for the purpose of science and reason, the most ideal male parts were used

(Shelly, 23). The monster is originally kind and sensitive, wanting nothing more than to be loved and accepted in the cruel society of the novella. Instead, they are surrounded by people who represent masculine Enlightenment ideals that judge them as evil because of their "terrible" appearance (Shelly, 30). The monster is completely isolated, having to learn through experience rather than teaching (Shelly, 40). They were also demonized by the society of man, and as a result, the effect that Enlightenment masculinity had made the creature ultimately turn to violence (Shelly, 42). The creature soon became embittered and enraged at their treatment, so they used their creator Victor and his enlightened self to their advantage: "I am alone and miserable: man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. My companion must be of the same species and have the same defects. This being you must create" (Shelly, 181). Utilizing the power of masculinity, however, again ends in violence as Victor dismembers his second creation—his first creation's companion (Shelly, 181). This one act of violence snowballs as the monster becomes a killer. The masculine reasoning rises in the shape of desire for revenge against Victor and all of humanity for rejecting him coming to the surface in the form of violence, believing this is the only answer (Shelly, 202).

In terms of female characters, this novella only contains a few. Margaret, who is the recipient of Walton's letters and journal, is not heard from even once (Shelly, 3). Both Justine and Elizabeth's roles seem to primarily be victims of male violence (Shelly, 204). The second creation Victor begins to create, the female mate, is violently dismembered and destroyed by Victor; the enlightened man (Shelly, 181).

Although Mary Shelley was the daughter of pro-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote one of the earliest Enlightenment-era works on feminist philosophy, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), her female characters within the gothic novella *Frankenstein* were

given little to no voice or action within the novel. This reflects how women were given little to no access to Salons or publishing during the Enlightenment era (Schott, 472). Shelly was also surrounded by successful men of the Enlightenment such as her husband, Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron (Schott, 474). With these influences, Shelly is perhaps critiquing Romantic masculinities and even portraying her own experience as a woman in the "Age of Reason" through the lack of voice and action that both her characters and women in Europe at this time experience (Schott, 474). In terms of Shelly's experience with the enlightened man, we can see that the male-dominated novella, *Frankenstein*, is about the creature's struggle, just as much as it is about the female experience of male violence (Shelly, 204).

Again, portraying the enlightened man, Shelly focuses on stereotypical aggressive, overreaching men with a fear of physical intimacy, as it could be seen as surrendering their masculinity (Shelly, 203). In Victor's case, his wedding night could result in another version of creation, which is now the result of his biggest regrets and worries (Shelly, 204). This heightens when the creature threatens, "I shall be with you on your wedding night." The creature fulfills this promise, appearing at Victor and Elizabeth's wedding bed. This shows the creature's repeated representation as an expression of Victor's subconscious lack of masculinity; that which is not covered by the attributes of the enlightened man (Shelly, 180). Being constantly afraid of his creation, which is a result of enlightened masculinity, Victor exposed his subconscious masculine insecurity which ultimately created violence (Shelly, 204). All three male protagonists, no matter their role, are revealed within *Frankenstein* to be extremely self-destructive, toxic, and control driven. This leads up to the violence that ensues for everyone associated with these protagonists—especially women (Shelly, 204).

In terms of more modern-day philosophy, a deeper understanding of the inherent violence that is invoked through masculinity can be discovered through the works of Carol J. Adams and Rebecca Solnit. Although Adams and Solnit have different philosophies, it is clear through both women that where there is violence, there is masculinity, as depicted in the scenes of *Frankenstein*. The main point of alignment between Adams and Solnit is the history of violent masculinity. Adams utilizes the violent process of the meat-packing industry within *The Sexual Politics of Meat and The Rape of Animals, the Butchering of Women* in order to show the violence we have as humans with a superiority complex (Adams, 37). Taking this a step further, Adams relates this violence to masculinity, as meat is inherently masculine (Adams, 268). Therefore, by consuming meat, or in Victor's case utilizing meat for masculine attributes, you are supporting violence, masculinity, and other social weights meat carries (Adams, 271). Within *Men Explain Things to Me*, Solnit utilizes her experiences with "mansplaining" in order to explain the superiority complex that men feel over women. Ultimately, this leads to violence against women as we often see with enlightened men (Solnit, 19). By using facts, data, and other perspectives, Solnit is able to identify the role society plays in upholding masculinity (Solnit, 19). This toxic view of masculinity above femininity, above basic morals, is what both Adams and Solnit accredit for the acts of violence that occur. Violence and masculinity are consequences of each other as seen within *Frankenstein* through the creation and chase. Without change, they will continue to cycle.

Adams' discoveries within the topic of animals show the true disconnect that man creates with their food; almost dehumanizing it. This is similar to how Victor quickly dehumanizes his creation (Adams, 40). The connections that Adams made with gender, however, are especially astonishing. By comparing the inherent violence of the meat packing industry with the toxic

masculinity many men buy into within society, the connection that violence and masculinity have is apparent (Adams, 43). Similarly in the meatpacking industry, Victor curates the perfect parts of human meat for his creation (Shelly, 22). Playing into this idea of using meat or human flesh for a benefit or ego boost is supporting toxic masculinity and violence (Adams, 270). Solnit mentions similarly how gender roles within society have allowed masculinity to flourish into seeing women beneath them. Making them seem so insignificant that they cannot think or do anything for themselves—very similar to how women are portrayed in *Frankenstein* (Solnit, 19). This version of toxic masculinity is already violent but becomes an even greater problem when women try to go against the system, as men no longer have superiority as their masculinity is that fragile (Solnit, 19). In the case of *Frankenstein*, Victor's masculinity breaks as soon as his masculinity should be at its peak since his creation is against the system (Shelly, 42). Taking the points both women have discovered, we can see that buying into masculinity that society has created for centuries will then allow more violence to occur. Allowing violence to happen as Victor did, it will ensure masculinity continues to hold power, no matter how fragile. By taking steps to create moral equality amongst all living entities, we can then attempt to end the unnecessary violence that many continue to face.

By utilizing her male protagonists within *Frankenstein* and considering the lack of action given to female characters, it is clear that Shelly is critiquing the masculinity surrounding her. Within the context of the Enlightenment era, Shelly is able to depict toxic Enlightened masculinity through the action and inaction within the novella, exposing its inherently violent outcomes.

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