
Misogyny in Early Gothic Novels: A Feminist Analysis with Reference to Frankenstein

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Abstract

Gothic fiction, which first appeared in the late eighteenth century, established a literary style that was heavily influenced by psychological complexity, terror, and the paranormal. But behind its terrifying aesthetic is a recurring pattern of patriarchal ideology-shaped gendered depiction. This essay analyzes how misogyny functions in early Gothic literature, specifically focusing on Frankenstein (1818). The study examines how female characters like Elizabeth Lavenza, Justine Moritz, and Caroline Beaufort are marginalized, silenced, or reduced to symbolic roles within the story by drawing on feminist theoretical perspectives, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's idea of woman as "the Other."

The destruction of the female creature is further examined in the study as a crucial act of erasure that represents masculine fear around female autonomy. The book subtly criticizes gender inequality by exposing the negative effects of patriarchal standards while also seeming to replicate them. The paper contends that sexism functions as both a structural principle and a thematic concern in early Gothic writing by placing Frankenstein within the larger Gothic tradition.

Keywords: Gothic fiction, misogyny, feminism, Frankenstein, patriarchy, female agency

Introduction

With its examination of terror, the paranormal, and the darkest aspects of human existence, the Gothic novel, which first appeared in the late eighteenth century, signaled a change in literary taste. Conventions created by early Gothic authors were later modified and improved upon by Mary Shelley in Frankenstein. The genre reflects the gender ideals of its

era

even if it is frequently praised for its depth of imagination and psychology. Patriarchal presumptions about gender roles are reinforced by the frequent portrayal of women as helpless, defenseless, and dependent.

A helpful context for examining these depictions is offered by Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283). Misogyny in Gothic fiction manifests itself not just through overt animosity but also through structural marginalization, which deprives women of autonomy.

Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283) provides a useful framework for analyzing these representations. In Gothic fiction, misogyny operates not merely through overt hostility but through systemic marginalization, where women are denied agency and reduced to objects within male-centered narratives.

Misogyny in Early Gothic Tradition

Female protagonists are frequently imprisoned in repressive settings and subject to male power in early Gothic works like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. "The Gothic heroine is a prisoner, threatened by male power," as noted by Ellen Moers (Moers 91). These stories uphold the concept of male domination and reflect larger cultural concerns about female freedom. These depictions show how misogyny is ingrained in both story structure and character representation. Rarely do women exist as independent subjects with their own voices; instead, they are mostly seen as symbols or victims.

Elizabeth Lavenza: The Idealized Woman

The idealized feminine persona created by patriarchal ideology is best represented by Elizabeth Lavenza in *Frankenstein*. She is described as the "angel in the house," as described by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Gilbert and Gubar 20). She is shown to be pure, kind, and loyal. Her bond with Victor Frankenstein completely defines who she is, and her primary role is to provide emotional support. Elizabeth's passive status in the story and her final death—a result of masculine actions—further highlight her lack of agency. Her portrayal emphasizes how the Gothic framework denies women subjectivity and objectifies them.

Justine Moritz: Silencing and Injustice

Justine Moritz represents the institutional silencing of women. Despite her innocence, she is unjustly executed after confessing to a crime she did not commit. Her forced confession illustrates how patriarchal systems compel women to internalize guilt and submit to authority.

This reflects what Mary Poovey identifies as the ideological construction of feminine virtue, which demands obedience and self-sacrifice even in the face of injustice (Poovey 45). Justine's fate exposes the extent to which legal and social structures perpetuate misogyny.

Caroline Beaufort: The Self-Sacrificing Mother

The stereotype of the selfless woman whose identity is characterized by devotion and caring is personified by Caroline Beaufort. The notion that women are primarily appreciated for their service to others is reinforced by her death, which was caused by her caring role.

According to Kate Millett, "patriarchy's chief institution is the family" (Millett 33), where women's tasks are limited to emotional labor and caregiving. This dynamic is reflected in Caroline's character, which highlights how limited female identity is in patriarchal society.

The Female Creature: Symbolic Erasure

The most overt instance of misogyny in *Frankenstein* is the destruction of the female creature. Victor's choice to destroy her before finishing reveals a profound fear of women's independence and ability to procreate.

He expresses concerns about women upending established power systems by speculating that the female creature may become autonomous or unruly (Shelley 163). Since the notion of a self-determined female existence is completely rejected, this act is the ultimate erasure of female agency. Female Absence and Narrative Structure Structural misogyny is further reinforced by the story's lack of female voices. Walton, Victor, and the Creature are the only male narrators who mediate the story; women are left out and have no say.

This is consistent with Gilbert and Gubar's theory of the "anxiety of authorship," which holds that female expression is stifled in a literary tradition that is controlled by men (Gilbert and Gubar 49). It is possible to read Victor's quest to generate life without the involvement of women as a symbolic exclusion of women from intellectual and biological creativity. Gothic Fear and Patriarchal Criticism *Frankenstein's* Gothic themes of deformity, secrecy, and seclusion heighten its examination of gender discomfort. A rejection of female biological power can be seen in Victor's desire to hijack the natural process of reproduction.

His eventual demise, however, implies that this kind of exclusion results in imbalance and devastation. In this way, the book exposes the moral and emotional constraints of patriarchal ambition, serving as a critique of it.

Conclusion

In early Gothic literature, misogyny functions as a structural principle as much as a thematic issue. Frankenstein represents the patriarchal mindset of its era by depicting disadvantaged and suppressed female characters. However, the book also subtly criticizes that very system by highlighting the negative effects of barring women from positions of agency and innovation.

Frankenstein thus holds a prominent place in feminist literary discourse, illuminating the ways in which Gothic fiction simultaneously perpetuates and challenges gender injustice. In the end, the book shows that when female agency is suppressed, chaos and devastation result instead of order.

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