



Desire, gender, power, language: a psychoanalytic reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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Abstract

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*Psychoanalytic literary criticism has always had a particular fascination with texts dealing with the supernatural, the mysterious and the monstrous. Unfortunately such criticism, valuable and provocative though the insights it has provided have been, has all too often treated the text as a "symptom" by which to explain or analyse an essentially extratextual factor, such as the author's psychological disposition. Many interpretations of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* provide typical examples of this approach. Much psychoanalytic (and also feminist) criticism and interpretation of the novel have focused on the female psyche "behind" the text, showing how the psychoanalytic dynamics structuring Shelley's own life have found precipitation in her novel. This article offers an alternative to this type of psychoanalytic reading by interpreting the novel in terms of a framework derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, focusing on the text itself. This interpretation focuses primarily on the interrelated aspects of language, gender, desire and power as manifested in the novel, with the aim of highlighting some hitherto largely unexplored aspects of the text which may be useful in situating the text within the larger current discourse concerning issues of language and power.*

1. Introduction

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has long been one of the preferred texts of psychoanalytic literary criticism. This may be ascribed to the fact that the text's Gothic combination of singularly powerful Oedipal thematics and explicit explorations of monstrosity and the supernatural make it particularly accessible to psychoanalytic interpretation. Furthermore, Mary Shelley's personal history has provided ample material for her novel to be read successfully in psychobiographical terms. By the same token, *Frankenstein* has also, more recently, become a favourite text of feminist critics.¹ Although both the psychoanalytic and feminist approaches (and varying combinations of the two) have yielded valuable and provocative interpretations of the text, much of the work done in these fields has (arguably) been compromised by an over-zealous psychobiographical approach, which shifts the investigative emphasis from the *text* to the *author*. This approach is exemplified in the following remark by Gilbert and Gubar (1990:152, 153): "[T]o a girl with Mary Shelley's background, literary activities, like sexual ones, must have primarily been extensions of the elaborate, gothic psychodrama of her family history", because "her developing sense of herself as a literary creature and/or creator seems to have been inseparable from her emerging self-definition as daughter, mistress, wife, and mother".

Such a psychobiographical/feminist approach is undeniably both interesting and productive, but, as Jacobus (1982:138) remarks, it "may tell us about women's lives, but it reduces the text itself to a monstrous symptom" by which to analyse and interpret the psyche of the author.² This article offers an alternative to this kind of psychoanalytic reading by interpreting the text from a framework largely derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, which focuses on the textual dynamics of the novel itself. This interpretation aims to indicate how psychoanalysis as literary

1 For examples of such interpretations, see Gilbert and Gubar (1990), Poovey (1980), Johnson (1982), Spivak (1985) and London (1993).

2 Wright (1986:146) similarly states that much of the initial work done in psychoanalytic literary theory was based on the assumption that the work of literature was analogous to fantasy and could therefore be "treated as a symptom of a particular writer". This automatically leads to the psychoanalysis of the author, which presupposes a direct relation between text and author – an assumption to which there are, of course, several objections. Nevertheless, she also acknowledges the interest and prevalence of this approach (see Wright, 1986:145-148).

interpretative strategy may open up new possibilities of reading which are attuned to contemporary issues of gender, power and language.³

Lacanian psychoanalysis is specifically well suited to this purpose, since it acknowledges the important role that language plays in the construction of the self-perception of the speaking subject (Lacan, 1988:80). After the subject's initiation into the order of language (the Symbolic) it is forced to redefine and restructure its notion of self with every encounter with language (Lacan, 1988:80). This continual restructuring of the perception of the "I" due to the subject's encounters with language has profound implications not only for the subject's ego-concept, but also for issues revolving around gender and desire, since the tension between the two orders of the Imaginary and the Symbolic are associated respectively with the mother and the father, as well as the unconscious Oedipal tensions of sexual desire, aggression and guilt that accompany the entry into the Symbolic. Thus, according to Lacan, the unconscious is not only *structured like* language, it is in effect *created by* language, since it is with the entry into the Symbolic that the subject becomes aware of the prohibitions and restrictions of the Father, which originates the need for repression and creates the unconscious (Wright, 1984:109; Hogan, 1990:19).

From these preliminary comments the main determinant which influences the way in which male and female are conceptualised in *Frankenstein* can be surmised. To simplify, it may be posited that if the Symbolic order of language is associated with the rules and definitions of the Father, then transgression of these rules will presumably be characterised in female terms, and generally associated with the Imaginary order, defined by its primary identification with the mother. This basic premise is disseminated in several directions in the novel, constantly shifting within the co-ordinates of language, power, gender and desire.

3 It should be emphasised that this article does not set out to be a Lacanian reading of *Frankenstein*. Rather, it adapts certain salient ideas drawn from a Lacanian psychoanalytic paradigm to facilitate an interpretation of the text that is sensitive to issues of gender, power and language. Admittedly, this framework utilises a rather literalised version of Lacanian psychoanalysis, but as stated, the aim of the article is not to provide a Lacanian reading of the text, nor is the intent to suggest that the equivalence between Lacan and Shelley's texts provides evidence of the validity of notions of the nature and structure of the Symbolic and its relation to the Imaginary. Identifying similar processes in Lacan's view of the psyche's development and in Shelley's novel is primarily intended to provide an interpretation of the textual and psychoanalytic dynamics of *Frankenstein*.

2. From Imaginary to Symbolic

The tension between Imaginary and Symbolic is a central problem in *Frankenstein*, and this is most obviously apparent in the character of the monster. When narrating his history to his creator, Victor Frankenstein, the monster begins his story as follows:

It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being: all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard and smelt at the same time ... I felt light and hunger and thirst, and darkness; innumerable sounds rang in my ears, and on all sides various scents saluted me ... (Shelley, 1994:98-99).

This is a striking description of what in Lacanian terms would constitute the early stages of the Imaginary order. Obviously, the monster as speaking subject is attempting to linguistically describe the essentially non-linguistic state of the Imaginary where he,⁴ as still non-subject, is in a formless state, nothing more than a jumble or shapeless mass of disordered perceptions and needs, which remains so until the structuring force of language comes to work upon it (Wright, 1984:107). For Lacan (1988:79), this early phase of the Imaginary is "all at the same time chaotic and absolute, primal". At this point in his development, the monster's primary need is for a mother, not only to fulfil his physical requirements, but also because the mother/child relationship is the primary means by which the subject defines itself (Lacan, 1988:210). However, the monster is, in all respects, a motherless child⁵, and to fulfil his desire for a mother, he is forced to find a substitute mother-figure. He accomplishes this by attributing the idealised characteristics of the Imaginary mother to a natural object, the moon:

Soon a gentle light stole over the heavens and gave me a sensation of pleasure. I started up and beheld a radiant form rise from among the trees. I gazed with a kind of wonder. It moved slowly, but it enlightened my path ... the only object I could distinguish was the

4 Since the prelinguistic nature of the Imaginary excludes gender definitions, it is actually strictly speaking inaccurate to use the male pronoun when referring to the monster in this early phase of his development. However, for consistency's sake, the male pronoun is used throughout this article when referring to the monster.

5 Frankenstein acts as both father and mother-figures for the monster in different circumstances. His position as father to the monster will be discussed in more detail in sections 3 and 6. His role as mother is primarily based on the fact that he does, in effect, give birth to the monster, only to abandon him. The metaphors of pregnancy and childbirth used to describe Frankenstein's creation of the monster also supports this view (see section 5).

bright moon, and I fixed my eyes on that with pleasure (Shelley, 1994:99).

The repeated references to the pleasure, security and guidance that the moon provides the monster, coupled with the idealised way in which it is perceived and the fact that it is the only object the monster is able to distinguish among the "confused and indistinct ... multiplicity of sensations" (Shelley, 1994:99), suggests the possibility that it functions as a substitute mother-figure for the monster. This is enforced by the fact that mythologically the moon is almost universally regarded as a female symbol or a symbol of the universal mother (Cirlot, 1983:215). In this way the monster constructs for himself a fantasy female/mother-ideal, and places himself within a unitary relationship with her, characterised by a strong pre-linguistic and primarily visual identification and fixation, also evident from the passage quoted above. This idealised unity of the mother/child dyad is the constitutive relationship of the Imaginary order, as yet unthreatened by the prohibitions and restrictions that the father places on this relationship (Wright, 1984:108-109).

However, it seems as if the Oedipal tensions that will accompany the entry into the Symbolic are already present in latent or vestigial form in this phase. When relating the early part of his history, the monster also frequently mentions the sun, whose light becomes "more and more oppressive" (Shelley, 1994:98) to him. Thus the sun, by virtue of being contrasted with the moon, becomes associated with the qualities of the father-figure. Already at this point in the monster's development there is a prefiguration of the oppressive and restrictive rules of the Father.

The mother-ideal described above is only the first of a series of mother-ideals that repeat themselves throughout the text, and which eventually evolve into the characteristic role that the female characters of the novel assume. This role becomes more obvious once the focus shifts from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, in which the Father's restrictions and rules as constituted in language place a prohibition on the unitary relationship between the mother and child (Wright, 1984:109), causing the mother-ideal specifically, and the female in general, to become the focus of desire. For this reason, the monster's entry into the Symbolic, marked by his acquisition of language, becomes one of the most consequential junctures in the text. It not only changes his perception of himself as speaking subject (see Shelley, 1994:115), but also influences the textual and sexual dynamics of the entire novel. From this point onwards, there is a perpetual conflict between the Law of the Father and the desire for the mother, which becomes the structuring force of the novel, as the following sections will argue in more detail.

3. The Symbolic and the Father

One of the main characteristics of the Symbolic order is that the father is designated as the dominant figure in this order, in contrast to the Imaginary, where the role of the mother predominates. In this respect it is significant that Frankenstein, the monster's father-creator, is first introduced to him *through the medium of language*. The monster discovers Frankenstein's journal of the months preceding his creation in "some papers in the pocket of the dress" (Shelley, 1994:125) which he had taken from Frankenstein's laboratory, and through this learns of his origins. In doing so the monster encounters his father's definitions of him, definitions that are primarily negative and restrictive. Frankenstein describes his creation as a monster, a bodied corpse and a demon, thus categorising him and effectively prohibiting him from the circuit of normal human intercourse.

This already suggests the nature of the domain of the Symbolic, in which the subject is forced to define himself in terms of the demarcations set by the Symbolic Father. The Symbolic is the realm "where the naming of social roles go on" (Wright, 1986:155), and it is these definitions which not only provide the subject with a place from where to speak, but also simultaneously place certain restrictions on the subject, based on these social roles or positions. These restrictions cause the monster, as subject in the Symbolic, to desire an escape from the constraints of the Law of the Father, back to the effortless primary identification of the Imaginary. This desire is clearly articulated by the monster when he expresses his wish to return to his "native wood" where he had known nothing but "sensations of hunger, thirst and heat" (Shelley, 1994:116). Of course, the Imaginary to which he craves a return is also characterised by the inseparable unity and security of the mother/child dyad, but once the subject, the monster, has entered the Symbolic, this relationship becomes a forbidden one, and the Imaginary mother becomes the forever unattainable desired object.

4. The Symbolic and desire

4.1 The monster

Another important result of the subject's entrance into the Symbolic is the assignment of gender roles and the commencement of gender-oriented desire (Wright, 1984:110). Through his induction in the Symbolic domain of language, the monster learns of

... the differences between the sexes ... how the father doted on the smiles of the infant ... how all the life and cares of the mother were wrapped up in the precious charge.

But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched over my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses (Shelley, 1994:116).

The entrance into the Symbolic places the monster as subject within the system of words where the naming of social roles goes on and which therefore binds everyone to either the male or the female gender. This awakens in him a desire for a companion of the opposite sex, a desire which originates in his desire for the repossession of the Imaginary ideal-mother. This is manifested in the text by the fact that the monster is continually gazing, staring and spying on female ideals in an "aesthetically distanced form" (Sherwin, 1981:889), as he does with the moon, the portrait of Frankenstein's mother, with the women in the De Lacey household, with the sleeping Justine, and also with the female monster, his potential companion who is destroyed by Frankenstein. These female characters are always idealised versions of femininity, and thus become nothing more than different reflections of the coveted Imaginary mother, always placed in the specularised position of the desired.

This desire for the female ideal of the mother crystallises in the monster's longing for a female companion of his own kind, and he believes that it is Frankenstein's duty to provide him with this female companion (Shelley, 1994:140). This demand which he puts to Frankenstein forms the pivotal point in the structure of their relationship, and it is also at this point that another Lacanian principle comes into play. The fulfilment of the subject's (the monster's) desire is in its totality dependent on the acquiescence of his father/creator, echoing the Lacanian principle that the Father's definitions and laws as constituted in language prescribe that desire must wait, and that, ultimately, the satisfaction of desire will be indefinitely deferred (Wright, 1984:109).

The reason for this deferral lies in the nature of the Symbolic itself: the subject has to formulate in the restrictions of language whatever desire it has, and yet language also infinitely defers the satisfaction of this desire along the chain of signifiers. Speech, then, becomes "the mill-wheel whereby human desire is ceaselessly mediated by re-entering the system of language" (Lacan, 1988:179). The monster has to articulate his desire *in language*, significantly *to his father*, and the fulfilment of this desire is at the mercy of Frankenstein as father-figure. Frankenstein exercises this power of withholding satisfaction to its full extent. He

keeps swaying between conceding to the monster's request and refusing it, and finally, he exterminates every hope of satisfaction that the monster might ever have, by destroying the half-assembled female monster in front of his first creation's eyes. In this way, Frankenstein as Symbolic Father becomes the agent of the deferral of satisfaction, and language becomes the ineffectual medium through which the monster as subject must try to reach the unattainable.

4.2 The portrait

The desire for the retrieval of the pre-Symbolic unity with the Imaginary mother is not unique to the case of the monster, but is repeated endlessly throughout the novel, suggesting that it is this desire and the restrictions that the Law of the Father places on it that constitute the central dynamic force of the text. It is important to note, as Gilbert and Gubar (1990:156) do, that all of the major characters and almost all of the minor characters in *Frankenstein* are either motherless or completely orphaned, from Walton, Frankenstein, the monster, Caroline Beaufort and Elizabeth Lavenza to Justine, Felix, Agatha and Safie. Most significant among these are the characters within Frankenstein's own family circle, and those closely related to it, for within this circle, there is a curious circuit of desire which may be seen to originate in the desire for the mother.

This current of desire is most effectively symbolised by the role which the portrait of Frankenstein's mother, Caroline, plays in the murder of the child William, and its influence on the characters connected to it. The portrait is a miniature representation of Caroline, which Elizabeth wears as a pendant around her neck. The portrait is in itself already very significant, for several reasons. Firstly, it is a clear indication of the Imaginary nature of the mother-ideal, since the portrait is a miniaturised, idealised image of the mother, a kind of metonymic signifier of the Imaginary mother-ideal. Secondly, it is a signifier which places the woman in a specularised position, the position of the desired, which is the position that all the female characters in the novel assume. Furthermore, this signifier becomes what could be called a circulating signifier, since it changes positions and circulates throughout the text and between characters (see also Gilbert & Gubar, 1990:160). Initially, the portrait belongs to Elizabeth, but she gives it to the child William. When he is murdered by the monster, Elizabeth believes herself to be the cause of his death, because she thinks that the motive for the murder is the theft of the precious miniature. The monster, having killed the child, takes the miniature, because "in spite of my malignity, it softened and attracted me. For a few minutes I gazed with delight on her dark eyes ... and her lovely lips, but presently my rage returned ..." (Shelley,

1994:137-138). When the monster finds Justine asleep in a barn, he uses the portrait as a device to implicate her in the murder of William, by putting it in the folds of her dress. In this way the portrait is displaced from Elizabeth to William, to the monster, to Justine, and eventually it completes the circle and returns to Elizabeth and the Frankensteins. As mentioned, all these characters are motherless, and their attachment to the portrait of the mother becomes indicative of the desire for the Imaginary mother. However, at the same time it also gives an indication of the transgressive nature of this desire. Possession of the portrait, of the mother-ideal, is in all cases associated with murder, guilt and retribution – and ultimately all these characters are punished for their desire by being killed, thereby effectively eliminated from the text.⁶

4.3 Frankenstein and Elizabeth

The most complex example of the way in which the desire for the absent mother manifests itself is in the relationship between Frankenstein and his "more than sister" Elizabeth Lavenza. Elizabeth is adopted by the Frankensteins, and is accepted by Victor as his sister, plaything, and personal possession (Shelley, 1994:34). Moreover, after the death of Frankenstein's mother, Caroline, Elizabeth assumes the role of the mother in the Frankenstein household. In this way she becomes sister, substitute mother and eventually also bride of Frankenstein, a curious relationship bordering on incest. In explaining this relationship, Frankenstein says: "*No word, no expression* could body forth the kind of relationship in which she stood to me ..." (Shelley, 1994:34; my emphasis). This passage, ostensibly merely the typical affected hyperbole of the lover's discourse, also lets slip the essentially Imaginary, pre-Symbolic quality of the relationship between Frankenstein and Elizabeth: the fact that Frankenstein uses Elizabeth as a substitute for the lost Imaginary mother. Frankenstein's desire, like that of his monster, is focused upon a female companion, and rooted in the desire to reclaim the Imaginary mother. Elizabeth, like the monster's series of female ideals, is consistently described as a transcendental idealisation of the feminine (see Shelley, 1994:33), which indicates her ties with the Imaginary, together with all the other female characters in the text.

From this desire for the mother springs the dream that Frankenstein has in lapsing into sleep after the creation of the monster – the dream which

6 Gilbert and Gubar (1990:160) make the same point, though in slightly different terms when they state that "the smiling miniature of Victor's 'angel mother' seems a token of some secret fellowship in sin".

is indeed *the* "privileged psychoanalytic moment in the text" (Sherwin, 1981:887). Frankenstein relates his dream as follows:

I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the graveworms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror ... when ... I beheld ... the miserable monster I had created ... A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous ... (Shelley, 1994:56).

The horrifying rendition of the Oedipal fantasy-gone-wrong has several important implications. As Sherwin (1981:887) notes, "there is a treacherous wishing-dreading circuit that links Elizabeth and the Creature to the mother, the central term of the triad". Elizabeth becomes equated with Victor's dead mother, and in embracing her, Victor tries to repossess the maternal body. In this way the true desire underlying Victor's almost incestuous relationship with his cousin-sister-bridge is exposed as the forbidden desire for the Imaginary mother. Furthermore, it needs to be emphasised that it is the *monster's* birth/creation that is the cause of the dream, which places the monster within this circuit of Victor's desire for the repossession of his dead mother. As Veeder (1986:366) states, the "primary object of Frankenstein's affection is ... his mother Caroline, and the primary object of his scientific labours is ... the discovery of a principle of life which would bring her back from the dead". The monster, then, is the product of Victor's desire to resuscitate the "fantasy elaboration" (Sherwin, 1981:885) of the Imaginary mother, as also expressed in the bizarre mummy/ mommy pun in the above passage. Of course this effort founders spectacularly: Frankenstein's endeavour to recreate his mother-ideal constitutes a forbidden attempt to bring the Imaginary mother within the bounds of the Symbolic, and as such ends in horrifying failure and ultimate retribution.

5. The female and transgression

This relates very strongly to the issue of transgression in the novel, which is certainly a key theme, as indicated by the subtitle of the novel – *the modern Prometheus* – and exemplified in Frankenstein's passion to discover "the secrets of heaven and earth" (Shelley, 1994:36). This exploration of the transgression of certain limits is certainly not a novel theme, and is also central to the ideology of Romanticism. However, in *Frankenstein* it acquires a new twist, which can be ascribed to the fact

that transgression, in this novel, becomes equated with femaleness.⁷ This is manifested in several instances in the novel. Firstly, there is the unmistakably female nature of Frankenstein's creation project. As Waxman (1987:15) states: "Shelley speaks of Victor's pursuit of knowledge in female metaphors: metaphors of pregnancy and childbirth describe Victor's acquisition and use of forbidden knowledge concerning 'natural philosophy', as well as the consequences of its use." Frankenstein's laboratory becomes a kind of artificial womb in which he contravenes the natural process of creation by creating life through supernatural means. However, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Victor's transgression in creating life is not in the first instance a violation of some cosmological prohibition. Rather, because Victor's transgression is essentially based on the prohibited desire for the mother, and furthermore articulated in female terms, it constitutes an infringement of the Law of the Father. In this way femaleness becomes associated with transgression, and a prime example of this would be the way in which the creation and destruction of the female monster are described in the text.

Frankenstein's first creation project is initially characterised by feelings of "astonishment", "rapture" and "delight" (Shelley, 1994:50), because he altruistically and idealistically presumes his endeavour to be for the benefit of humanity – and of course, subconsciously, he is excited by the prospect of discovering the principle of life, so as to reclaim his mother-ideal:

Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me ... Pursuing these reflections, I thought that ... I might in process of time ... renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption (Shelley, 1994:51-52).

However, when Frankenstein contemplates creating a female monster, he can only conceptualise it in terms of possibilities of destruction and

7 it is also possible to read *Frankenstein* as a critique of the Romantic "model of the solitary, creative imagination" (Day, 1996:164). The novel develops this Romantic ideal of the individual imagination breaking through all fixed boundaries to the extreme, and illustrates its "dangerous and destructive propensities" (Day, 1996:164). However, idealist Romantic notions of the imagination and related concepts like the sublime are often conceptualised in masculine terms (see Botting, 1996:104; Day, 1996:186), and Shelley's critique is also effected by replacing this masculine conceptualisation with an essentially female mythology in her novel.

catastrophe. She "might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate", or she might "turn in disgust from him to the superior beauty of man" (Shelley, 1994:160). Alternatively, their union might result in "a race of devils ... propagated upon the earth who might make the very existence of the species of man ... full of terror" (Shelley, 1994:160-161). This explicitly connects femaleness with the negative consequences of transgression. This can in turn be traced back to the fact that, because the desire of the mother/female which underlies all interaction in the novel, is a prohibited desire, the guilt that the subject feels in contravening the patriarchal decrees of the Symbolic leads him to equate everything female with transgression.

Another illustration of the link between the female and transgression may be found in Frankenstein's destruction of the half-assembled female monster. Spivak (1985:255) emphasises that it "is impossible not to notice the accents of transgression inflecting Frankenstein's demolition of his experiment to create the future Eve". Frankenstein does not regard the female monster that he starts to create as a conglomerate of body parts torn from corpses, but rather as a human being. When he destroys her he feels "as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being" (Shelley, 1994:165). Only when witnessing the spectacle of the female, which is the visible reminder of his violation of the Law, does he realise the full extent of his transgression. This explains why he cannot finish her: the horror of transgressing the Law of the Father in (re)creating the female as reincarnation of the Imaginary mother is too great to complete the act. Therefore she too must be destroyed, like so many of the other female characters of the novel.

6. The male and punishment

It is apparent that transgression is associated with femaleness, and because transgression calls for punishment, it is to be expected that this punishment will come from the realm of the Symbolic, from the Father. This is exemplified in the text by the elimination of the female characters, and in particular the deaths of Elizabeth and the female monster. In these two instances, the monster and Frankenstein respectively act as Symbolic Father to the other, punishing the other for desiring the Imaginary mother by destroying the object of desire. Just as the father in the Oedipal triangle places an absolute prohibition on the child's desire for the mother, the monster obstructs and eventually destroys Victor's desire for Elizabeth, as incarnation of the Imaginary mother-figure: a reciprocal gesture, since Frankenstein acts in the same capacity of prohibitive father to the monster. The monster and Frankenstein's acts of killing respectively Elizabeth and the female monster mirror each other,

and both of them are punishing the other for the desire that is rooted in the desire for the mother.

This punishment requires the death of the woman, suggesting that it is invariably the woman who falls victim in the struggle between the Father and the subject. Jacobus (1982:133) articulates this in terms of the Oedipal rivalry between the father and son when she says that in "Mary Shelley's novel intense identification with an oedipal conflict exists at the expense of identification with women", causing them to become submissive victims. This submissive position is evident not only in the constant thematic specularisation of female characters, but also in the structural devices of the novel. For example, the female characters of the novel are always focalised and narrated through the eyes of the male narrators, for the most part the monster and Frankenstein, with the result that they have no authoritative voice within the text – just as they have no authentic position in the Symbolic.

This specularised position of the female characters in the novel is the result of the fact that their main function in the text is not as genuine, individualised agents of action. Rather, they are merely different reflections and refractions of the desired Imaginary mother, images of the dead mother repeating itself throughout the text. All of this suggests that there is no place for the female in the Symbolic, since the only position the female characters have in the text is as the desired object of men, as manifestations of the Imaginary ideal mother with which unity is desired. In other words, within the Symbolic the woman has no authentic position, her only position is as an incarnation of the desired Imaginary mother. This desire is prohibited by patriarchal law, so that desiring the woman is equated with transgression. Any violation of the Law must be followed by punishment, and in the strange logic of the text this punishment constitutes the elimination of the object of desire, the elimination of the woman.

7. Conclusion

Reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* within a psychoanalytic paradigm, as this article has done, opens up possibilities for an interpretation which is attuned to contemporary issues, especially those related to language, gender and power. Utilising notions derived largely from Lacanian psychoanalysis as a conceptual framework for reading the novel, it becomes apparent how theoretical and literary texts may interact to produce readings that not only elucidate the textual dynamics of the literary text, but also manage to position it within the broader context of current social and literary issues.

One of the central explorations of *Frankenstein* is the tension between the orders of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, the prelinguistic and the linguistic. In this exploration issues of identity, language, desire and prohibition are of crucial importance, as is particularly evident in the development of the character of the monster. Essentially, the tension is between the desire for the retrieval of the pre-Symbolic unity and effortless primary identification with the Imaginary mother, and the prohibitions which the Symbolic Father places on this desire. This tension is not unique to the case of the monster, but is repeated throughout the novel, indicating its importance as the central dynamic force of the text.

An analysis of this tension facilitates an exposure of the ways in which male and female are conceptualised in the novel, and possibly even generally in nineteenth century literature. It essentially reveals the marginalised position of the woman – excluded from the Symbolic and specularised as the ultimate desired object of the Imaginary mother. Ultimately, when the male characters of the novel transgress too far in their desire for the woman, she becomes a threat to the patriarchal exclusivity of the Symbolic, and correspondingly has to be eliminated from the text, thus leaving the Symbolic to the dealings of men. In the case of *Frankenstein*, then, the use of psychoanalytic literary theory uncovers certain basic prejudiced assumptions on the nature and position of the male and female within discourse, and as such has a relevant contribution to make to contemporary debates concerning issues of gender.

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Key concepts:

feminism

Frankenstein (Mary Shelley)

psychoanalytic literary theory

Kernbegriffe:

feminisme

Frankenstein (Mary Shelley)

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