AQA English Literature GCSE

Frankenstein: Character Profile

Elizabeth Lavenza

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Elizabeth Lavenza

Character Summary

Despite being a more minor character in the novel, Elizabeth is **emblematic** of innocence, romantic love and **domesticity**, and is the **tragic victim** of Victor's **hubris** and ambition. Shelley's **idealised** portrayal of her nature means she acts as a **foil** to the chaos which follows Victor and Walton.

She is one of the few female characters in the novel, and is defined by her relationship with Victor, reflecting Georgian **patriarchal** attitudes. Given Shelley's mother's writing of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Shelley's depiction of Elizabeth's submission is likely a deliberate attempt to encourage readers to **scrutinise** the role of women in society.



Key Themes

Attitudes to Marriage

Elizabeth dies at the hand of the creature, **symbolising** Victor's failure to care for his wife. Since she represents **feminine purity**, her death marks the removal of virtue from Victor's life. When the monster kills her, he represents masculine aggression fighting feminine innocence. Masculinity defeating femininity again reflects Georgian attitudes to women as inferior to men.



It could be argued that Elizabeth is killed because she represents an **impossibly idealised** form of womanhood. Her passivity renders her too weak to survive at the monster's hands. In a world of violence (the **French Revolution**), Elizabeth's gentle nature cannot survive.

By **contrast**, Victor does not share Elizabeth's idealised attitude to marriage, expressing that ***"the idea of an immediate union with Elizabeth was one of horror and dismay".*** Likewise, Victor's dream where he kisses Elizabeth and she turns into the ***"corpse of my dead mother"***. Shelley emphasises how Elizabeth's view of marriage is at war with Victor's, therefore, Elizabeth's death may **symbolise** how their differing attitudes to marriage cannot co-exist.

Beauty and The Objectification of Women



Georgian society intensely **revered** women who were beautiful. Elizabeth describes Justine as ***"extremely pretty"*** and describes ***"the pretty Miss Mansfield"*, "her ugly sister"** and ***"a lively pretty Frenchwoman".*** The **repetition** of ***"pretty"*** underscores how Georgian society valued women primarily for their physical appearance. Since Elizabeth is the person describing these women, Shelley emphasises how women learn to **objectify** each other, as if viewing them through the **male gaze**.

By contrast, Shelley does not refer to the male characters in terms of their **physical beauty**. Victor describes Walton as having ***"unparalleled eloquence"***, emphasising how the male characters admire each other's **intellect**, whilst the female characters are obsessed with physical beauty.

Male Dominance and Female Intellect



Victor asserts dominance over Elizabeth when he explains that he might ***"claim Elizabeth"***. Shelley taps into **contemporary attitudes** that women became the legal property of their husbands after marriage, thus Victor truly has a legal ***"claim"*** to Elizabeth.

Despite contemporary beliefs that women were incapable of **rational** thought, Elizabeth speaks eloquently when she testifies in court, described as a ***"powerful appeal."*** Even though women were not allowed to testify in court, Elizabeth proposes a clear argument when ***"violently agitated".*** Shelley elucidates how men's superiority over women is not founded in **logic**. Elizabeth proves to be equally, if not more capable of rational thought than Victor.

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Context

The Role of Women and Early Feminism

In the **Georgian** era, women became the legal property of their husbands (a legal doctrine called **coverture**), and it was believed women were not capable of **rational thought**. This context helps modern readers to understand why Victor repeatedly refers to Elizabeth as ***"mine"***: in legal terms, she was his property. Whilst today this language may appear controlling, in Georgian society, this **possessive** language towards women was **normalised**.

The novel was originally attributed to Percy Shelley, but it was later revealed that Mary Shelley wrote the novel, and her husband offered suggestions in the margin. It was common for women to write under male **pseudonyms**, demonstrating the **patriarchal** attitudes which valued men's thoughts over women's. Women were often valued for their beauty over their mind, thus Shelley may be criticising contemporary society for confining women to the **domestic sphere**.

The French Revolution

Frankenstein was first published in 1818, in the **aftermath** of the **French Revolution** which ended in 1799. The French Revolution was a period of great social upheaval where traditional **social hierarchies** were challenged, and the conversation shifted to a focus on **liberty** and human rights.



Whilst Elizabeth has limited **agency** and is repeatedly referred to in terms of her physical appearance, her eloquent testimony in court is a subtle nod to changing attitudes to women.

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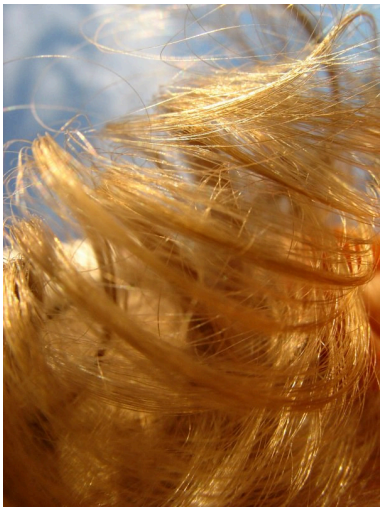
Key Quotations

"The saintly soul of Elizabeth shone like a shrine-dedicated lamp in our peaceful home"

- In the **exposition**, the reader is introduced to Victor's idealised perception of Elizabeth. Shelley's use of the **simile** ***"like a shrine"*** reflects how Victor views Elizabeth as sacred. A shrine is a place where people go to worship, indicating how Victor places Elizabeth on a pedestal. The **religious connotations** emphasise how pure and virtuous Elizabeth is.

- The **repetition of the sibilant** sounds in ***"saintly soul"*** and ***"shone like shrine"*** create a soft, peaceful **tone** reflecting the gentle nature of Elizabeth. Whilst Victor elicits violence and conflict later in the novel, Elizabeth is a **symbol** of peace and innocence.

"Her hair was the brightest living gold, despite the poverty of her clothing, seemed to set a crown of distinction on her head"



- Shelley's **metaphor** of ***"gold"*** and the **superlative** "brightest" emphasise how Elizabeth is the most pure and precious, inside and out. Alternatively, stating that Elizabeth is a precious and expensive material may **dehumanise** her as merely something that is valuable because of her beauty. Despite Victor's **upper-class background**, he notes the ***"poverty"*** of Elizabeth's clothing, emphasising their class difference.

- The reference to ***"gold"*** and ***"crown"*** may also indicate how Elizabeth is regal and valuable, reinforcing how foolish Victor was to neglect his relationship with her in favour of creating his monster.

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"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. We called each other familiarly by the name of cousin. No word, no expression could body forth the kind of relation in which she stood to me—my more than sister, since till death she was to be mine only"

- Shelley's **repetition** of ***"mine"*** emphasises how Victor seeks to assert dominance over Elizabeth, viewing her as his ***"possession"***. Whilst they initially appear to have a perfect, loving relationship, Shelley subtly alludes to how Victor sees her as something to assert **dominance** over. A ***"gift"*** refers to a transfer of ownership, reflecting contemporary attitudes to marriage: a woman became her husband's property.



- The reference to ***"till death"*** may **foreshadow** Elizabeth's death. The monster killing her is a threat to Victor's dominance over Elizabeth, as she no longer belongs to him.

- The **oxymoron** of ***"childish seriousness"*** illustrates how Victor hides under the label of ***"childish"***. A child protecting another does not feel like an act of dominance, but a man asserting ownership of a woman feels more sinister. Likewise calling her his ***"cousin"*** reinforces how Victor hides behind the label of family to hide his controlling nature. Shelley portrays Victor's domineering nature to warn of the potentially **suffocating** nature of marriage for women where men view their wives as something to dominate, not love. Arguably, Shelley kills Elizabeth's character to demonstrate how their relationship is not sustainable and cannot survive in the long-term.

- Further Victor's insistence that Elizabeth is ***"mine only"*** demonstrates how he seeks to **isolate** Elizabeth from other people as a means of asserting control over her. Shelley illuminates how unhealthy their relationship is underneath its **idealised** surface.

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