# AQA English Literature GCSE

## *Frankenstein:* Themes

### Gender

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# Gender

## Theme Summary

Shelley was writing *Frankenstein* in the **Georgian** era, where there were very strict delineations between men and women. Despite there being more female characters in the novel than male characters, the women mostly act as **supporting characters** and **plot devices** to further the action which centres around the male protagonist, Victor.

There are five main **archetypes** for female characters in *Frankenstein*:

- **Earth Mother** - is caring and a source of comfort in moments of stress or isolation, such as Elizabeth.
- **Temptress** - uses charm to distract the protagonist away from the moral path. It could be argued that science plays the role of temptress in the novel, encouraging Victor to **depart from societal norms**. Since Victor lost his mother early, science may act as a replacement for this role.
- **Damsel in distress** - is in need of rescue by the hero e.g. Caroline by Alphonse.
- **Platonic ideal** - the intellectual equal to the hero and ideal match e.g. Safie.
- **Dutiful partner** - gives an honest assessment of the hero's qualities and is the person the hero ideally ends up with. This could have been the female monster.




## Presentation of the Theme

### Caring as a Female Role

Frankenstein's interest in creating life is a **subversion** of the norm of women giving birth. As a consequence of him creating the monster, Elizabeth is murdered by the monster, and Justine is blamed for her death and is executed. Arguably, the novel is a **cautionary tale** against interfering with women's natural, caring role. Whilst the female characters are committed to caring roles with Caroline dying after nursing Elizabeth, Victor refuses to take on the **stereotypically female caring role**.

**Women and Agreeability**



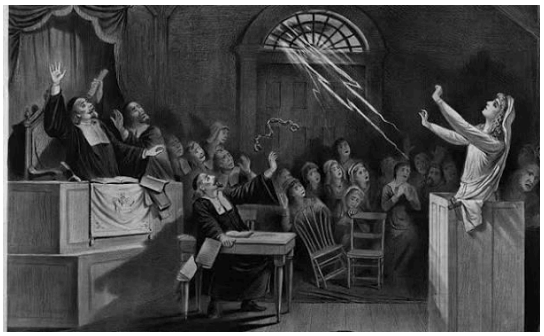
Whilst it could be argued that the monster is not treated kindly, on a closer inspection, the monster appears to interpret Justine's departure from agreeability as an attack on him. When finding Justine asleep, the monster fears that her ***"joy-imparting smiles are bestowed on all but me".*** Shelley may be subtly **criticising contemporary society** for expecting women to be agreeable at all times.

Despite Justine being suddenly woken by an eight-foot tall man, she is expected to instantly greet him with a smile, and her failure to do so **antagonises** the monster so much that he frames her for murder. Through presenting the reader with the monster's ludicrous expectations of female docility, Shelley mocks the contemporary assumption that women should be perpetually smiling and emotionally compliant.

**Women, Rationality and Education**

Despite women not being allowed to testify in court, Shelley gives Justine a rational and well argued **monologue** to deliver, **challenging** contemporary attitudes that women were incapable of rational thought.

Similarly, Frankenstein destroys his female creation because he worries she could become ***"a thinking and reasoning animal",*** subverting the notion that women were not capable of thinking for themselves. Ultimately, Frankenstein's biggest concern is that he may have created a woman who is **equal** to his male creation, serving as a threat to his masculinity. Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, argued in favour of boys and girls receiving the same education, but Frankenstein's beliefs are **emblematic** of contemporary concerns regarding women's education and the possibility of equality.



**Women as a Plot Device**

From the **exposition** of the novel, Shelley portrays women as **passive**, and merely a **plot device** to advance the action which revolves around the male protagonist, Victor. The first female character the reader is introduced to is Margaret, who is addressed ***"To Mrs Saville"*** at the start of Walton's first letter. However, the reader does not truly 'meet' Margaret; she is merely the recipient of Walton's letters whilst he is travelling the world.

Likewise, Victor's mother dies when caring for Elizabeth, thus the reader does not properly get to know Caroline before she dies. Elizabeth plays a similar role, marrying Victor before being killed by the monster he created. Justine is a servant, again meaning she plays a very **passive** role in the novel.




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