

Name

Date

Instructor

Course/Block

### The “Separate Spheres” Ideology in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is a complex novel with many different themes at work. Shelley explores a number of different ideas in her novel including that of the “separate spheres” ideology. This ideology is the idea that there is a public sphere and a private sphere. Men belong to the public sphere in which it is their role to actively go out into the world in order to work and handle all public affairs. In addition, there are certain attributes associated with males, such as strength, aggression, interest in the sciences, as well as being adventurous by nature. The private sphere, on the other hand, is the domestic realm in which females belong. In this sphere, women are nurturers, and they fulfill household duties. Women are not adventurous, and they barely leave the safety of the home to venture out of the private sector. They leave all of the public duties to the male. The attributes associated with the female are that of love, patience, virtue, and kindness (Smith 313-314). Finally, in the realm of separate spheres, women and family life tend to be idealized. All of the characteristics associated with the separate spheres ideology are exemplified in *Frankenstein*. Shelley carefully constructs her characters so that they fit into the roles aligned with the separate spheres ideology; and throughout the novel, Shelley demonstrates that “separate spheres” is a dangerous ideology that can ultimately lead to disaster. Shelley demonstrates that in order for one to have a healthy and happy life there must be a balance between the spheres, and this especially applies to

women because they are deprived of a voice, and they lack the freedom to make decisions in man's world.

There are five women who play a role in the novel. Out of the five women, there is only one who plays an active role. The others are merely mentioned briefly. This fact alone demonstrates the attitude that women are of little consequence. Caroline Beaufort is the first female character we encounter. She is introduced to us through Victor's narration: "Caroline Beaufort possessed a mind of an uncommon mould; and her courage rose to support her in her adversity. She procured plain work; she plaited straw; and by various means contrived to earn a pittance scarcely sufficient to support life" (1). Interestingly, this description of Caroline defines her as uncommon and courageous because she works outside of the home in order to earn a living. This is the first indication that women are expected to stay inside of the home or the domestic realm. Caroline dies fairly early in the novel when she nurses her adopted daughter, Elizabeth, back to health after suffering from scarlet fever. Caroline's only role is to raise children, take care of the household, and to perform charitable duties, and that is the extent of her character. Caroline possesses all of the qualities associated with women in the separate spheres ideology. She is loving, caring, nurturing, self-sacrificing, and benevolent. In addition, she only performs domestic duties. The one time that she works outside of the home, she is labeled uncommon; therefore, it can be concluded that Caroline is an example of a woman who lives according to separate spheres. Sadly, it is her domesticity that ultimately leads to her death.

Justine is another female character in the novel who fulfills her domestic duties and dies early on. She enters the Frankenstein family as a servant, although she is treated

with love and dignity. In Elizabeth's letter to Victor, she describes Justine as "very clever and gentle, and extremely pretty" (68). In addition, Elizabeth reminds Victor of why he liked Justine: "'Justine, you may remember, was a great favourite of yours; and I recollect you once remarked, that if you were in an ill-humor, one glance from Justine could dissipate it, for the same reason that Ariosto gives concerning the beauty of Angelica'" (67). This passage is significant because it reveals the way in which Victor views his family and his acquaintances. According to Elizabeth, Victor likes Justine because she has a nice effect on him. It is not her loyalty or her loving heart that appeals to him; it is the way in which she is useful to him. In the realm of separate spheres, a woman's purpose is not only to fulfill her domestic obligation, but also to satisfy the male. It is almost as if the female is not valued as a human, but more as an object that can serve its purpose. Victor's interest in Justine is an example of this idea. This is not to say that Victor does not care about Justine, but rather to say that the value of women is misplaced. Women are idealized and seen as angels or objects of beauty rather than as human beings with personal needs and desires. After Justine's introduction, she is not mentioned again until she takes the fall for William's death. She is blamed for William's death because his locket, with a picture of Caroline, is found in her pocket. Afterwards, she is executed for his murder, and this is her only role in the novel. Both Caroline and Justine are loving women who faithfully fulfill their domestic obligations. Yet, that is the only mention of them. Neither of them is very involved in the plot, and both of them die almost immediately after they have been introduced. Neither Caroline, nor Justine, has a voice in this novel. We hear from Caroline briefly as she is dying, and we hear from

Justine at the trial as she prepares to meet her fate. They are simply not heard, and they seem to be fairly insignificant in the novel.

Elizabeth is the most important female character in the novel, and out of all of them, she has the most significant role because she has a voice. Elizabeth writes several letters to Victor in which she talks about various things. Ironically, she is the most important person to Victor, so it is fitting that she should be the one who has the opportunity to speak. However, Elizabeth is no different from the other female characters when it comes to her purpose. Victor loves Elizabeth in a selfish way. He idolizes her and thinks of her as if she is an angel. Victor cannot see past his own need for Elizabeth, and he never thinks of what she may need, which ultimately leads to her death. Again, this is an example of the characteristics associated with the separate spheres ideology. Men idealize women and family, and they look upon women as objects of their own lust and satisfaction. From the moment Victor describes Elizabeth, it is clear that she is more of an object of beauty to him than she is an actual person. In the following excerpt, Victor describes Elizabeth:

Her hair was the brightest living gold [...]. [...], her blue eyes cloudless, and her lips and the moulding of her face so expressive of sensibility and sweetness, that none could behold her without looking on her as of a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features. (43)

This description demonstrates the extent to which Victor admires Elizabeth, and it also shows the basis of his admiration. In addition, when Elizabeth comes to live with the Frankenstein's, she is presented to Victor as if she is a gift rather than being introduced as

a new member of the family. Victor is told by Caroline the day before her arrival, “I have a pretty present for my Victor – to-morrow he shall have it.” Victor then tells us that the following day, “[...], I with childish seriousness, interpreted her words literally, and looked upon Elizabeth as mine – mine to protect, love, and cherish” (44). Therefore, it is obvious that Elizabeth is seen as an object of affection, and this is a dangerous predicament. Although, Victor swears that he will love, cherish, and protect her, he can only do this once he has protected himself because Elizabeth is not his first priority. He is too selfish to put her first, as a person. In the end, Elizabeth is murdered by the monster because of Victor’s selfishness. Even though he has been warned by the monster, he fails to realize that it is Elizabeth he must protect rather than himself. As a result, Elizabeth is the third woman who dies in the novel. Victor could have prevented Elizabeth’s death, just as he could have prevented Justine’s death, but both times his own selfishness gets in the way because he does not value these women as he should.

Shelley constructs the novel the way that she does in order to comment on the insignificance of women in the realm of separate spheres. Women give their complete heart and souls to their families, and they are even willing to sacrifice their lives, and ultimately they have nothing. There is no self-satisfaction for women in separate spheres. Everything that they do is for the good of others, and their only enjoyment is to see their families live safe and happy lives. In the novel, all three of the women die. The fate of these characters supports the idea that Shelley believes that women die on the inside when they live a life of separate spheres. The average woman, especially during the nineteenth century, loved her family and wanted to fulfill her domestic obligations, but she could also easily be overwhelmed by it all. Women need to venture out of the private

life and into the public life for a change of scenery. They need to have choices and a sense of independence in order to be happy. Ultimately, happiness leads to a healthier life, and this is what Shelley is trying to prove. All of the women in the novel are trapped in the private life, and they never have the opportunity to venture out. They are silent characters, and in the end, their obedience and silence leads to their destruction.