

Women and Society in Literature of Georgian and Victorian England: A Case Study of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i
mađarskog jezika i književnosti

Ana Vukelić

Žene i društvo u književnosti georgijanske i viktorijanske

Engleske: Mary Wollstonecraft i Mary Shelley

Završni rad

Mentorica: izv. prof.dr.sc. Biljana Oklopčić

Osijek, 2019.

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Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and

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Abstract

Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter Mary Shelley are arguably the most important female writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, while Wollstonecraft is one of the most significant contributors to the women's rights movement, with some of her ideas expressed in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* being referenced in the modern-day laws about the rights of women. This paper will analyze the life and work of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, focusing mostly on their most famous and most significant works, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*, respectively. Furthermore, it will analyze the position of women through the biographies of both writers and the autobiographical elements in their works, as well as through the analysis of the female characters in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* as a representation of more or less typical women of the time. Finally, it will search for and analyze the influence of Mary Shelley's mother's works and ideas on her writing in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* and her work in general. The aim of this BA paper is to analyze the position of women in society and literature through the above mentioned aspects of the life and work of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley and to prove the importance of both of these authors, but especially Wollstonecraft, in the female struggle for obtaining the most basic human rights and the still persisting fight for gender equality.

Keywords: Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, woman, society, rights.

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Introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley are two of the most well-known women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The first chapter of this paper will provide the necessary historical and literary context for the analysis of the given topic, mentioning the most important historical events that took place in Britain, but also in France, during Wollstonecraft's or Shelley's lifetime. The second chapter, subdivided into two subchapters, one for each author, concentrates on the most important events in the lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, respectively, which helped shape their character and influenced their writing. This chapter also covers their work as writers, mentioning and briefly analyzing some of their most important literary works. The third chapter provides an extensive analysis of Wollstonecraft's most important work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, analyzing her views on some important topics covered in this book, such as education, love, marriage, and the position of women in the society. The fourth and final chapter of this paper provides an analysis of female characters in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* as a representation of typical (and less typical) women of the late eighteenth century, analyzing also the autobiographical elements in the novel and Wollstonecraft's influence on Shelley's writing that can be seen in this novel. The aim of this BA paper is to prove the importance of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley in literature as well as in the women's rights movement by analyzing their ideals and opinions about important topics, concentrating on their biographies and their most important works, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, respectively.

1. The Historical Context

Mary Wollstonecraft, born in 1759, lived her short life in Georgian England during the second half of the eighteenth century. At that time in England, women were considered to be beings subordinate to men. Yet, Norma Clarke argues that the 1780s and 1790s were characterized by a rather favorable and friendly climate for the female writers, when Wollstonecraft began writing, with the works of female authors being well received and bringing them “fame and social elevation” (249). Even Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was not considered too controversial and was generally received well by the public, since it was seen more like another work on education than an actual vindication of the rights of the subjugated sex. This was also the time of the French Revolution, which found many of its supporters in British writers, including Wollstonecraft, who was against aristocracy, considering it harmful for the society. In fact, Wollstonecraft was so interested in the French Revolution that she wrote *A Historical and Moral View on the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1795). Many of Wollstonecraft’s fellow writers moved to France so they could join the revolution, as did Wollstonecraft in 1792. In Britain, these were also the years of many reform movements in which quite a few writers took part, including Wollstonecraft’s publisher Joseph Johnson, who “founded the London Revolution Society in 1788” (Clarke 251). After Wollstonecraft’s death, many female writers who wrote feminist works, in which they showed their admiration for Wollstonecraft and her work, decided to publish them either anonymously or using a pseudonym and would almost never name Wollstonecraft directly.

Wollstonecraft’s daughter Mary Shelley (1797) was born after the French Revolution, when France was governed by Napoleon, while in Britain the revolutionist ideas, such as her father’s or her mother’s, were no longer welcome as it was also the time of anti-Jacobin politics. Ironically, Shelley lived in the period when it was even harder for women to state

their opinions freely in their works since the “radical feminist protest of the sort that was seen in Wollstonecraft’s lifetime was more or less silenced for two generations” (Clarke 257). Therefore, it was not surprising that Shelley also chose to publish her most famous work *Frankenstein* anonymously.

2. The Lives and Literary Works of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley

2.1. Mary Wollstonecraft

Looking back on Wollstonecraft's childhood and life could be useful to understand what led her to become such an emancipated and outspoken woman. After her death, her second husband, William Godwin, wrote a book of memoirs about her life, in which he states that "her father was a man of quick and impetuous temper" (Godwin 9) and a drunk who sometimes hit his wife, and "Mary would often throw herself between the despot and his victim, with the purpose to receive upon her own person, the blows that might be directed against her mother" (Godwin 10). Later in life, Wollstonecraft had to find work to provide for her family, so she started writing. That was when Wollstonecraft met Joseph Johnson, her publisher, who was well-known for his respectful treatment of women. Johnson encouraged her to write, assuring her she was talented enough to make a living out of it. With his help, she met many other writers of the time, including her future husband William Godwin. She became successful enough as a writer to be able to live only of writing, which is something not many female writers could do, even in the centuries to come.

The previously mentioned work of Godwin's, titled *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, is said to have ruined Wollstonecraft's reputation posthumously. Even though it was actually meant to pay homage to the extraordinary woman she was, it achieved the opposite, because it revealed too many details about her life, which should have stayed private, such as her love affairs and her two suicide attempts. Her lifestyle was harshly judged by the early-nineteenth-century society, which saw her to be too promiscuous and put in question the validity of her work. Both William Godwin and his deceased wife became almost demonized in the public eyes, Godwin even becoming "one of the most hated men in the country," whose name (along with Wollstonecraft's) was

synonymous with atheism, treason, adultery, bigamy, licentiousness, and infanticide” (Carlson 62).

Wollstonecraft was an independent woman who lived her life quite freely, not even sharing the same household with her husband William Godwin because of which she was judged by the community. Wollstonecraft first met Godwin the same year she began writing her *Rights of Woman*, in 1792, but it was not until 1796, when they met again after she got back from Scandinavia, that they began their romantic relationship. Soon after she got pregnant with her daughter Mary, the two of them decided to get married. However, they were even more criticized after they decided to get married as they were known as “England’s two most outspoken opponents of marriage” (Carlson 4). Godwin was not, however, Wollstonecraft’s first lover. In his *Memoirs*, Godwin reveals that Wollstonecraft had a love affair with American Gilbert Imlay, whom she had met during her stay in Paris. With Imlay she had a daughter named Fanny, but the two of them never got legally married. After she found out he was cheating on her, she tried to commit suicide on two occasions. This detail of her life, once it came out, was abused by her critics, who saw this as a sign of her weakness and as a deed contrary to what she was advocating.

Throughout her life, Wollstonecraft showed interest in the education of children, especially of girls. This topic is present in many of her works, such as *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, but it was also present in her life, since she spent some years of her life running a day school with two other women – her sister Eliza and her friend Fanny Blood. Wollstonecraft also wrote fiction, which was also full of autobiographical elements, including naming the main characters after herself. Her most famous works of this genre are *Mary: A Fiction* and *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*. Her autobiographical novel, *Mary: A Fiction*, which is one of her first works, brought her success. Wollstonecraft situated the protagonist of her novel *Maria: or, The Wrongs of*

Woman in a locked asylum and “attributed to her the thought ‘was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?’” (Clarke 255), while through another character, Jemima, she tried to show that “the denial of civil and political rights subjugated women as a sex, and even the supposed exceptions like herself and her fellow writers were thereby limited” (Clarke 256). Being a zealous supporter of the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft could not refrain herself from writing a response to Edmund Burke, who criticized the revolution in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, titled *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Similarly, she wrote her “first book-length work of political philosophy, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, dedicating it to Talleyrand-Périgord” (Cronin and Botting 311).

2.2. Mary Shelley

For her daughter Mary Shelley, Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* served as fundamental literature for the acquisition of knowledge of the world, feminist beliefs, and the ideals of an emancipated woman both in life and writing. However, even though Shelley grew up reading the works of her radical parents, through the years she grew distant from her parents’ ideologies and was more influenced by the society and the popular political views of the time she was living in. Critics often highlight Shelley’s contradictions in her views and “*oscillation* – between fear of the revolutionary class and sympathy with the laboring poor – that is of interest, for it illuminates not only her own politics, but those of early-nineteenth-century England and of *Frankenstein*” (Smith 13).

As a writer, Shelley was quite insecure, often doubting whether her writing was good enough, due to various reasons. Being a daughter of such successful writers, Shelley felt pressured to prove herself worthy of her family name, and her husband Percy, who was always encouraging her to write, might have pressured her even more. Shelley was also much

more influenced by men and the patriarchal society than her mother and, contrary to Wollstonecraft's ideals, she believed that her writing should resemble that of a man in order to be worthy, so she would often let her husband edit her works before publishing.

Growing up, Shelley was well-aware of the public opinion of her mother's lifestyle, but she still followed almost the same pattern as her mother. She met Percy Bysshe Shelley, a young poet, when she was only seventeen and they started their love affair with encounters at the cemetery that she frequented, visiting her mother's tomb. Percy Shelley was at that time a married man, but only a month after his wife committed suicide, Mary and Percy decided to elope together to Paris, where they got married. Together they travelled to many European countries and about those travels they wrote "their Romantic travel memoir of their elopement, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*" (Cronin and Botting 313), which is another proof of Wollstonecraft's influence on her daughter's writing as it was inspired by her *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Their marriage was anything but ideal since Mary had to put up with many rumors about her husband's infidelities, as well as the death of their three-year-old son and another miscarriage, which resulted in her depression. Unlike her mother, who died young, Shelley outlived her husband, who died suddenly by drowning. She became a widow and had to take care of their only son alone. From Percy's father she was receiving only a small income for her son, so she continued writing and publishing her works to earn her living.

During her lifetime, Mary Shelley managed to produce "an impressive body of work – five novels, several poems, a dozen articles and reviews, twenty short stories, a travel book, two books of biographies, and critical editions of Percy's poetry and prose – and it may be that her husband's early 'inciting' helped sustain her after his death" (Smith 12). However, Shelley's most successful work is, without a doubt, her novel *Frankenstein*, described as a

“masterpiece of speculative fiction on the transformation of human nature in times of intellectual and social experimentation” (Cronin and Botting 314).

3. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft criticizes the treatment of women in the eighteenth-century society, which is why she is considered to be a role model for female writers and this work of hers the first major work of feminism. For a woman of the eighteenth century, Mary Wollstonecraft was very outspoken, a supporter of the French revolution, who “maintained that women should be educated to support themselves, with or without marriage” (Falco 3), and that women should have the same rights as men. In this work, Wollstonecraft reflects upon many important issues of the time, including education, marriage, and love.

Wollstonecraft starts her work by criticizing the fact that women’s education is neglected and that they are “rendered weak and wretched” (Wollstonecraft 29). She criticizes the fact that the educational system is designed by men, who tend to forget that women are also human beings equal to them and instead treat them as subordinate beings, see them only as their mistresses, and objectify them. She claims that even though the education of women has rather improved in comparison to previous periods, women are still being ridiculed by writers. Wollstonecraft also provides a quite detailed and credible description of the eighteenth century women, comparing them to children:

It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves, - the only way women can rise in the world,- by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act: - they dress; they paint, and nickname God’s creatures.

(32)

Such poorly educated women later become mothers and it is expected from them to raise their children, which Wollstonecraft considers them to be incompetent for, and, therefore, she again pleads that women be given a better education so that they would not spoil the temperament of their children from the early age:

Mankind seem to agree that children should be left under the management of women during their childhood. Now, from all the observation that I have been able to make, women of sensibility are the most unfit for this task, because they will infallibly, carried away by their feelings, spoil a child's temper. The management of the temper, the first, and most important branch of education, requires the sober steady eye of reason; a plan of conduct equally distant from tyranny and indulgence. (95)

The topic of education persists throughout her work, expressing her opinions about what should be improved in the education of not only women or girls, but children in general. In the chapter titled "On National Education," Wollstonecraft states that she is not very pleased with either home-schooling or boarding-schools and suggests proper education should be a kind of combination of both. Furthermore, she claims that it is necessary for the government to establish proper day-schools, in which children of both sexes should attend classes together and be taught the same things. In such schools, children should wear school uniforms so that there would be no visible differences between children despite their different social status. "After the age of nine," she suggests, children "intended for domestic employments, or mechanical trades, ought to be removed to other schools" (Wollstonecraft 199), while the children of a higher intellect and abilities should attend a different school where they would be taught subjects such as languages, literature, science, history or politics. Another point she touches upon, with which most of the teachers of the twenty-first century would surely agree, is that children are required to memorize too much information presented to them as

unquestionable truths and facts instead of encouraging them to use their own minds and think for themselves. Finally, she stresses the importance of teaching children how to treat animals, even suggesting that “humanity to animals should be particularly inculcated as a part of national education” (Wollstonecraft 203) because she believes that cruel and violent behavior of young men towards animals may lead to the same kind of behavior towards their future wives and children. However, she is critical of people who treat their pets better than their children and claims to be equally disgusted by that kind of behavior as she is by the people who are violent towards animals.

Wollstonecraft mentions another important issue throughout her work – the problem of what becomes of a married woman. She claims that, once married, women live in a perpetual state of childhood, as “most middle class women did little more than pick out materials for their dresses and devote themselves to their ‘toilette’ for hours on end” (Falco 3). She goes as far as comparing marriage to legal prostitution and says that “women would never be able to achieve virtue or to demonstrate the ability to be independent, reasoning, autonomous human beings as long as they were educated for nothing other than ‘to catch men’” (Falco 3).

However, while stating her disagreement with the things previously mentioned, she mentions that she is only expressing her opinions and not trying to question the male superiority in the physical sense as “this is the law of nature; and it does not appear to be suspended or abrogated in favour of woman” (Wollstonecraft 30). In the introduction, she also promises to be sincere and efficient in proving her point, giving more importance to arguments and less to words and the elegance of the language.

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft considers love to be only a distraction from what should be the true purpose of a woman’s life – to acquire virtue and explore the limits of her intelligence:

Besides, the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practicing various virtues, become a friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband, and if she deserves his regard by possessing such substantial qualities, she will not find it necessary to conceal her affection, nor to pretend to an unnatural coldness of constitution to excite her husband's passions. (Wollstonecraft 55)

She does not think very highly of love, calling it "the most evanescent of all passions" (Wollstonecraft 54) and claiming it is almost impossible for love to become constant. Even between married people love could only exist for a certain period of time, if it even exists, after which men look for mistresses, and the wives mostly look for other lovers as well. On the other hand, she thinks very highly of friendship, which she calls "the most holy band of society" (Wollstonecraft 56) because it is "founded on principle, and cemented by time" (Wollstonecraft 100). Yet, she considers true friendship to be even rarer than true love. Wollstonecraft also believes that an unhappy and neglected wife makes the best mother, so a loveless marriage could even be beneficial for the family because in that way a woman can perform her duties as a mother, as well as her duties of life, without being distracted by love, which normally "disturbs the order of society" (56).

Another important issue Wollstonecraft introduces in her work is the question of what happens to the woman when her husband dies and she is left to raise and educate her children alone, being herself almost an ignorant being due to her poor education. Such a woman, already having her family, is not the most desirable option for any decent single man looking for a wife, so she is left with only two options – she could marry a man, risking that the man may be a fortune-hunter who is only after her late husband's fortune or, if she is not left with sufficient provisions, she must start providing for the family herself.

Wollstonecraft is also very critical of some of her contemporaries' views on women, for example, Milton's, Rousseau's, or Burke's. Rousseau's views are the complete opposite to hers and would nowadays be considered sexist. He sees women as slaves and "declares that woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her *natural* cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her more alluring object of desire, a *sweeter* companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself" (Wollstonecraft 52). Like Rousseau, Milton also considers women to be "formed for softness and sweet attractive grace" (Wollstonecraft 45), with no souls, made to be obedient, nothing more than "gentle, domestic brutes" (Wollstonecraft 46) – an opinion which Wollstonecraft considers offensive towards women.

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft suggests that all children, regardless of their sex, would be able to play together harmlessly if they were not taught from their infancy what their gender roles are, how they should act, and what their interests should be. Throughout her work, Wollstonecraft makes references to or quotes authors such as Rousseau, Milton or Dr. Gregory as examples of the incorrect ideas people have about what is natural to each gender, and what is just imposed on them from their early childhood by their education, mostly criticizing their assertion that things such as fondness of dress are natural to women. On the other hand, she quotes others, such as Thomas Day, as the examples of reasonable men who have the same views of women's education as herself. She provides a quote from Day's *Stanford and Merton*, vol. 3, where he discusses his methods of educating his daughter, whom he refers to as his companion and states that if "women are in general feeble both in body and mind, it arises less from nature than from education" (Wollstonecraft 67). He even complains about the type of education given to women in the most developed countries of the world, arguing they are taught nothing more than "a few modulations of the voice, or useless postures of the body" (qtd. in Wollstonecraft 67). Day puts the blame for women becoming

such incompetent child-like creatures on the poor education they are given, where they are “corrupted from their infancy, and unacquainted with all the duties of life” (qtd. in Wollstonecraft 67). Wollstonecraft even dedicates a whole chapter to quoting some of the statements of her contemporaries and providing arguments against their ideas. Those contemporaries of hers include not only male authors such as Fordyce, Gregory, or the previously mentioned Rousseau, but also some female authors, such as Hester Piozzi, Baroness de Staël or Madame Genlis. She shows her disagreement with all three mentioned women, considering most of their ideas and arguments absurd because they were under too big an influence of the male authors such as Rousseau, but also shows her admiration for Catherine Macaulay, whom she considers to be “the woman of the greatest abilities, undoubtedly, that this country has ever produced” and “an example of intellectual acquirements supposed to be incompatible with the weakness of her sex” (Wollstonecraft 132).

From today’s point of view, Wollstonecraft may seem too harsh and critical of her own sex, often using an ironic tone herself when referring to her fellow women, but this could be only because she believes that they are capable of much more than the things they are limited to by the society. She criticizes the woman’s lack of ambition, but blames it mostly on how they are raised and educated. She firmly stands behind her belief that all women should have equal rights and chances of education, because only by giving them equal treatment and opportunities could it be proved if women are truly inferior to men in their capacities, as it is claimed by men. One of the arguments she uses to prove that women are, by being deprived of proper education, made to be (or at least appear) weaker than they naturally are is her comparison of women to military men. She uses this argument to prove that the same results will be obtained if men are given the same type of education as women:

The consequences are similar; soldiers acquire a little superficial knowledge, snatched from the muddy current of conversation, and, from continually mixing with society, they gain, what is termed the knowledge of the world; ... Soldiers, as well as women, practice the minor virtues with punctilious politeness. Where is then the sexual difference, when the education has been the same? All the difference that I can discern, arises from the superior advantage of liberty, which enables the former to see more life. (Wollstonecraft 49)

Wollstonecraft wanted her fellow women to stand up for themselves, be independent and think with their own heads, just like she did. She also shows to have the right feminist views by stating that she does not want the women to have power over men but to be equal and to have power only over themselves, just like men do.

However, there are still some contradictions in Wollstonecraft's work that the critics do not hesitate to point out, such as demanding rights for women while at the same time severely criticizing most of them. Furthermore, unlike the detailed proposal for the changes she thinks necessary in national education, she fails to specify what she considers those rights of women, mentioned in the title of her work, should be – “including its title, the term ‘rights’ appears only a little over thirty times in the text” (Abbey 229).

4. The Female Characters in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*

There are three main characters and narrators in Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* – Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the Creature – all of whom are male. All of the female characters in the novel are secondary. Their only purpose is that of “a kind of pet (Victor ‘loved to tend’ on Elizabeth ‘as I should on a favorite animal’ [p. 30]); or they work as house wives, childcare providers, and nurses (Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein, Elizabeth Lavenza, Margaret Saville) or as servants (Justine Moritz)” (Mellor 3). Interestingly, the only female character who does not fit any of these descriptions is Safie, a foreigner. Safie is also the character most similar to both Mary Shelly and her mother Mary Wollstonecraft.

Being born in a very egalitarian family and with her mother being a radical feminist, it could be assumed that Mary Shelley used this novel to criticize the male dominance in the society. Even though her mother Mary Wollstonecraft died only a few days after giving birth to her, Shelley was still influenced by some of her mother's most popular works, such as *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* or *A Historical and Moral View on the French Revolution*, both of which she is said to have been reading while writing *Frankenstein*. Another proof that Shelley was influenced by her mother's ideals while writing this novel is the De Lacey family, consisting of siblings Felix and Agatha and their blind father. What makes them the representation of her mother's ideals is the fact that they are a loving and caring family who shares all work equally. Occasionally, they are visited by Safie, the daughter of a Turkish merchant, with whom Felix is in love. She is the most independent female character in the novel, she does not follow the rules of religion and society (for example, she travels alone, and women of the time rarely travelled far from home at all). The motifs of traveling and not following the rules of society are autobiographical. As previously mentioned, Mary Shelley eloped with her husband Percy Shelley when she was a young girl

and together they travelled to different parts of Europe. Like her mother, she was also judged for not obeying the rules of society and for marrying a man whose first wife had just committed suicide.

Other female characters are characterized as more typical women of the time. Caroline Beaufort, Victor's mother, is portrayed as a grateful and generous woman who throughout her sacrifices herself for the well-being of others. She marries her father's best friend out of gratitude and she demonstrates her kindness and generosity by helping the poor because to her "it was more than a duty; it was a necessity, a passion – remembering what she had suffered, and how she had been relieved" (Shelley 42). Finally, she also adopts a child, Elizabeth Lavenza, whom she loves as her own and sacrifices her own health to nurse her back to health once she falls ill, which results in Caroline's own death from the same disease. Elizabeth is not much different from Caroline and after her death she takes Caroline's role in the house. She is very grateful to Caroline and the Frankenstein family for giving her a home and later she is even ready to sacrifice her own happiness by not marrying Victor. When she finally marries him, she is killed by the monster as a punishment for Victor. Another similar character is Justine Moritz, a servant at the Frankenstein's home, who is also very grateful and devoted to the Frankenstein family. She is wrongfully accused, convicted, and executed for the murder of Victor's youngest brother William. All three of these characters have tragic endings, some of which could have been different if the society had treated women equally as men, which is something Shelley criticizes:

Implicit in Mary Shelley's attack on the social injustice of established political systems is the suggestion that the separation from the public realm of feminine affections and compassion has caused much of this social evil. Had Elizabeth Lavenza's plea for mercy for Justine, based on her intuitively correct knowledge

of Justine's character, been heeded, Justine would not have been wrongly murdered by the courts. (Mellor 4)

Apart from the De Lacey family, the Frankensteins are also not a typical nineteenth century family, but in a different way. Victor narrates that both of his parents enjoyed taking care of him:

Much as they were attached to each other, they seemed to draw inexhaustible stories of affection from a very mine of love to bestow them upon me. My mother's tender caresses and my father's smile of benevolent pleasure while regarding me are my first recollections. I was their plaything and their idol, and something better – their child, the innocent and helpless creature bestowed on them by heaven, whom to bring up to good, and whose future lot it was in their hands to direct to happiness or misery, according as they fulfilled their duties towards me. (Shelley 42)

What is unusual here is not the role of the mother but that of the father, as fathers did not spend much time at home raising their children but working away from home. Some critics thus suggest that these characters of loving and caring parents represent the type of parenting Shelley did not have as a child but longed for.

However, even though this family can be seen as a representation of the ideal family Wollstonecraft talks about, from another point of view, the family relations in the Frankenstein family can be seen as being based on a kind of destructive gratitude, which always results in sacrifice, especially of women. Johanna M. Smith raises the question of whether there is "something destructive about the good domesticity Mary Shelley seems to advocate" (320) and mentions many authors who have similar theories, such as Hollinger, who "argues that the novel's violence results partly from 'the repression required to internalize the masquerade' of femininity" (qtd. in Smith 321).

Even though *Frankenstein* can be read as a feminist critique of the male dominated society, it is not that obvious at first. In fact, Shelley did not even want the public to know *Frankenstein* was written by a female writer. She did not want her novel to be read with any kind of prejudice because of her well-known parents, but also because of the skepticism towards female writers at the time, which is another example of how underappreciated the women of the nineteenth century were.

Conclusion

Many feminist writers and critics of the centuries-to-come took interest in exploring the lives and revising the works of both Wollstonecraft and Shelley. American feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have devoted themselves to exploring the lives and works of women writers of the nineteenth century and they concluded that their thinking and, consequently, writing were under too big an influence of the “both overly and covertly patriarchal” (qtd. in Murfin 299) society they lived in. It is thus questionable whether some of the arguments critics used against these two women are even valid as it was not reasonable to expect them to be completely immune to the male influence, especially not in that kind of male-dominated society. This line of thought raises the question of whether someone’s work should be valued on both a personal and a professional level, or should someone’s personal life be completely disregarded when judging their work. Whatever the correct answer may be, it is undeniable that both of these women have significantly contributed to the status of women in society and literature, each in her own way. Mary Shelley may not have contributed much to the women’s fight for obtaining their rights as she never directly wrote about feminism or women’s rights, but she certainly contributed to the position of women in literature, being the author of what is today considered to be the “most famous of gothic novels” (Cronin and Botting 314) – *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Mary Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, was one of the most outspoken women of her time about important topics such as education and rights of women and her most influential work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* has been translated into many languages and served as an inspiration and as a reference work for many female writers both of her time and the centuries to follow. In conclusion, it can hardly be denied that both Shelley and Wollstonecraft continued to inspire women in some way, whether to become writers themselves or not to be

afraid to raise their voices and continue to fight for the rights they deserve as human beings equal to men.

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