**SEMESTER 4; CC 9**

**Frankenstein : Mary Shelly**

**The male characters in Frankenstein**

Mary Shelley’s portrayal of male characters is important in the understanding of the novel as an autobiographical critique of her father and husband’s treatment of her. In this relation, Percy’s resemblance to Victor supports that interpretation of the text. Badalamenti presents a chart which displays the similarities between real events from Mary Shelley’s life and those in her novel. Here, 10 out of the 20 examples refer to direct parallels between Percy and Victor. To name a few: Percy’s favourite pseudonym in early life was Victor; his favourite sister was named Elizabeth; where Victor experimented with science to discover the principles of life, Percy was fascinated by the secrets of death and tombs; Percy was not monogamous and in the novel Elizabeth asks Victor if he loves someone else (Badalamenti, 2006: 426-7). In this context, Victor’s treatment of the creature becomes symptomatic for Percy’s, at times, indifference to Mary Shelley, her feelings, and their children. On the other hand, her negative representation of the male scientist/seafarer and their ambitions for glory can be viewed as a comment on men in general, and subsequently, how women are needed to prevent the consequences of uncontrolled male ambition and egotism. The resemblance between Victor and Percy is less important in this reading. A closer look at the male and female characters will generate a better understanding of Mary Shelley’s intentions with her representation of the sexes.

**Robert Walton**

Walton is a seafarer and we hear of his struggles, the complications of assembling a crew and his difficulties with his father. He is telling his story through letters to his sister Margaret, whom he treasures very dearly (keep in mind that she is miles away from him). Like Victor, Walton is driven by ambition and aspirations for glory. He is on a voyage to the North Pole and he describes it as something that he desires to ‘attain’ (much like how Victor thinks of Elizabeth; as property). It is Walton’s ambitions that have endangered him and his crew just like Victor’s ambitions endangered (and indirectly killed) the people surrounding him. But with the prospective of mutiny, Walton chooses to accommodate to his crew’s demands of aborting the dangerous mission that they have undertaken. Victor does not abandon his ‘mission’ and that seals his destiny. Other than this incident, Victor and Walton share traits of character and are very similar in their desires and ambitions. Walton is actually quite fascinated and infatuated with Victor, and he expresses these thoughts in the letters to his sister. Before meeting Victor, Walton had told her that he longed for a companion, not a female mate, but someone he could share his feelings and thoughts with. Victor is exactly what he wished for, and early on, it becomes clear that Walton feels a special bond towards Victor. In the following passage, Walton insinuates that the feeling is mutual: The stranger [Victor] has gradually improved in health, but is very silent, and appears uneasy when anyone except myself enters his cabin. Yet his manners are so conciliating that the sailors are all interested in him, although they have had very little communication with him. For my own part, I begin to love him as a brother; and his constant and deep grief fills me with sympathy and compassion. He must have been a noble creature in his better days, being even now in wreck so attractive and amiable. (Shelley, 1993: 22) There is an almost homosexual love between the two men, even though Walton describes it as a brotherly affection. The homosexual undertones are not only present between Walton and Victor, but also between Victor and his dear friend Clerval. This is yet another way that Mary Shelley excluded women. Even though there are women in the male characters’ lives, they still prefer and treasure male company the most. The women in Frankenstein are thus excluded from all spheres; they are not given voices in telling their stories, and they do not figure in the male characters’ 32 romantic lives either. The roles held by women in society have been taken away from them and instead men have substituted them. In this way, Victor can be seen as fulfilling Walton’s expressed desire of a companion whom he can share his experiences and thoughts with; a wife

**The dangers of ambition**

That Walton and Victor get along and find each other interesting has to do with their similarities of ambition and egotistical way of thinking. They both share a dream and an ambition to discover something new and tread on unknown territory; Walton wishes to travel to the North Pole and discover a passage that will make seafaring easier, and Victor wants to create a new species that will have him as the creator/father. Walton’s ambition of discovering unknown territory and his purpose of the voyage are expressed in his very first letter to his sister: Its [The North Pole] productions and features may be without example, as the phenomena of the heavenly bodies undoubtedly are in those undiscovered solitudes. What may not be expected in a country of eternal light? I may there discover the wondrous power which attracts the needle; and may regulate a thousand celestial observations, that require only this voyage to render their seeming eccentricities consistent for ever. I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man. (Shelley, 1993: 13) Walton is clearly interested in undiscovered land, not only does it satisfy his curiosity, it will also offer him glory and reputation. Just like Victor, Walton refuses to consider the possible dangers and consequences of his actions, and he is willing to risk his own safety if it is necessary: “These are my enticements, and they are sufficient to conquer all fear of danger or death, and to induce me to commence this laborious voyage with the joy a child feels […]” (Shelley, 1993: 13). Walton’s desire and ambition for his voyage to the North Pole are so important to him that he discards all fears and even the danger of death. In fact, his expectations for the work that he will be undertaking are so great that he sees them as having consequences for future generations: 33 But, supposing all these conjectures to be false, you cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation, by discovering a passage near the pole to those countries, to reach which at present so many months are requisite; or by ascertaining the secret of the magnet, which, if at all possible, can only be effected by an undertaking such as mine [My Italics] (Shelley, 1993: 13-4) That he wants to affect ‘all mankind’ seems tremendously ambitious and it is important in Mary Shelley’s description of male ambition and egotism which, in the case of science, can have fatal consequences. Victor also sees his experiment as affecting later generations and the future of science, but that will be discussed further in the section analysing Victor. This scientific inquisitiveness that both Walton and Victor possess is rooted in the curiosity and progress by experiments that dominated the science of Mary Shelley’s time. Jansson mentions that Tim Marshall relates the novel to the “’bodysnatching’ era of the 1820’s” where medical practitioners used unclaimed paupers’ bodies for their experiments (Jansson 1999 in Shelley, 1993: XX). And it seems that Walton and Victor’s desire to possess and control nature and life is represented as a dangerous path to choose. But as mentioned before, Mary Shelley’s own attitude towards science remains ambiguous. The other interesting aspect of this description of his aspirations is his emphasis on own ability and importance: ‘can only be effected by an undertaking such as mine’, implies that he is the only one who can succeed and that nothing else can have an influence. He also refers to the mission as being impossible and in that way stresses the importance and greatness of his achievement, if he succeeds.