feminist criticism and the works of Mary Shelley

Born of a political and social movement that claimed material, social, and civic rights for women, feminist criticism became important in the mid-20th century. The feminist agenda is basically fourfold: (1) to recover works written by women but not originally credited to them, and to include known women writers in the literary canon; (2) to revise the approach to reading female-written works, searching for a subtext that works against stereotypes of women in literature; (3) to investigate whether naturally engendered differences exist between writing by women and writing by men; (4) to study stereotypes of women created in literature by male writers and observe how such characterizations change over time, as well as how women read about women. All of these approaches apply to fiction by Mary Shelley.

Like all literary critics, feminist critics examine formal elements of literature to arrive at meaning in works of literature. Those elements in fiction include plot, character, theme, setting, style, and point of view. They also include format, figurative language, sound, imagery, and rhythm. However, feminist critics consider additional elements in their analysis and interpretation. Those additional elements draw on the historical era in which authors write and how literature depicts that era and its social mores, particularly those pertaining to women's rights. Such critics also regard details about the author's life as crucial, especially if the author's background seems to be responsible for her inclusion of certain subjects and themes. For instance, the prominent focus on the study of natural science during Shelley's era would be crucial to themes of her fiction, as would beliefs inherent to romanticism and its literature, including the privileging of the individual above the group, the importance of interaction with nature, and the focus on transcendentalism.

Power relationships in literature are particularly important to feminist critics. In Shelley's fiction, males always hold power while few female characters rise above flat stereotypes. However, while the male traditionally holds material power over the female, especially in works before the mid-20th century, she may succeed in subverting that power by turning what may at first be a disadvantage to her advantage. For example, males might demand silence of females as a culturally approved point of control, but the female character might, by failing to reveal crucial knowledge, use her silence to her benefit. An example is Constance in Shelley's story "The Dream" (1832), who takes her silence and feelings of isolation so far as to plan a move into a convent, a female bastion free of male sexual and material demands.

Women characters may also claim power bestowed by their particular talents, such as the title heroine of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847), whose art fills her with an unfeminine passion, which she freely expresses in her narration. In a few cases, female characters claim male power, such as Jane Austen's title character of Emma (1816), who, secure in her inheritance of her father's fortune, states that she will not marry as she wields her considerable social power in an attempt at love matches. In still other cases, the female protagonist may meet tragedy as punishment for her independence, a characteristic that would have been admired and rewarded in a male. Feminist critics see this in Shelley's character Fanny from Lodore (1835). Although Fanny does not die or suffer physical damage, she remains isolated due to her intellectual abilities. The novel closes as the reader learns that Fanny's fate is unknown. Another example, Bertha Rochester, Rochester's spirited first wife in Jane Eyre, goes mad and eventually dies due to her independent actions. Her figure is used as a metaphor for the marginalized woman in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal feminist work The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979).

Feminist critics also focus on the importance of traditional symbols in fiction, such as the caged bird, long symbolic of a woman admired for her appearance and her talent, yet restrained and imprisoned, physically, emotionally, or spiritually. In Shelley's Lodore, Edward Villiers compares Ethel to a bird, and in Falkner (1837), Alithea is compared to a bird on multiple occasions. Other traditional symbols include all types of flowers, but especially the rose. A rosebud generally represents a young, virginal woman, while a fully bloomed rose symbolizes a woman of sexual maturity. The heroine of Shelley's "Transformation" (1831), Juliet, is introduced early on through comparison to an opening rose in May. Shelley incorporated various flowers and plants throughout her fiction, not surprising in light of her dedication to romanticism, which had as a major tenet the importance of nature to spiritual health.

Certain colors relate symbolically to women, such as white, which in the Western tradition represents purity or naïveté. Thus,
women who wear white may be innocent young girls, or white may be used ironically to indicate women who have lost their innocence. Shelley repeatedly employs the color white in *Frankenstein* (1818); Mont Blanc, which means "White Mountain," towers over much of the novel's action, symbolizing the removal of purity from Victor's and the monster's evil activities. The moon traditionally represents woman who lacks her own importance and thus reflects the light of the sun, symbolic of man. Most of the monster's significant activity occurs during night, and the moon is often referenced as if it nurtures the creature born without a mother.

Mirrors are symbolic of self-reflection and indicate questions of self-identity for both male and female characters, but they are even more important for females, who traditionally had to worry about their appearance constantly. In writing about literature, feminist critics have also noted how women themselves have been used as mirrors for men, who desired their praise and support in such a way that the women served as reflections for the men themselves. Shelley's fiction takes this traditional approach in several instances. However, in "Transformation," it is the male protagonist/narrator who refers to a vision as mirroring truth. Because the narrator makes clear in the story's beginning the importance of passing along his tale to others, Shelley may suggest literature's value in portraying truth about human nature. In literature, women of great beauty may also be compared to statuary or other collectible works of art, often important to men only for their material value, another approach taken in "Transformation" and other of Shelley's stories.

Also important to feminist critics is the presence of any type of domestic creative endeavor on the part of women characters, as for centuries women had to suppress their artistic bent; painting, writing, and sculpting were viewed as imprudent and impractical for them. They engaged instead in "approved" activities, such as any type of needlework, cooking, and gardening, to express their artistic talents. Even at such traditional activities, female subjects could prove subversive, as does Madame Lafarge in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859): She used purled and dropped stitches to fashion a death list for the Parisian death squads into her knitting.

Feminist critics find interesting three traditional roles for women in early fiction, including that of the "angel in the house," an idea especially associated with Victorian women. In the late 1850s, the British poet Coventry Patmore wrote a series of poems entitled *The Angel in the House*, which praised women who could manage large families, serve others, and remain pure and "angelic." This image led the modernist writer Virginia Woolf to later declare that she had to kill the angel in the house in order to liberate her imagination to write as she should. Stories such as "Transformation" supported that categorization of woman as angelic, innocent, and childlike.

A second stereotype, also promoted by early Victorian fiction, was the invalid. Many women suffered physical disability following multiple unplanned childbirths, and the prone position was quite an acceptable one for a wife and mother. Shelley characterizes several mother figures in this manner, and some, such as Mrs. Frankenstein, die due to their selfless care of others. Feminist critics see a subtext in Shelley's work that undercuts the stereotype of the perfect Victorian family and its angelic mother in her criticism of irresponsible males who abandon their responsibility to their families.

The third stereotype of the whore appeared in various versions. The whore might appear as a temptress, stealing an unwitting male from his wife and family. In another version, she might possess "a heart of gold" and sacrifice not only her body, to financially support herself, but also her emotional and spiritual needs. She falls in love with men who, lacking the stigma attached to the women whose sexual services they used, reject whores as potential wives or serious lovers. Belle Watling in *Gone With the Wind* (1936) represents such a character in her relationship with Rhett Butler. Shelley does not include this stereotype, possibly because of the attitudes toward free and open sexual affair espoused by her romantic associates, including her husband.

By the time that feminist criticism arrived in the mid-20th century, critics also focused on changing the traditional literary canon studied in education. Long filled mainly with white male writers, the canon slowly altered over several decades to include not only white women writers but also women of color and of various ethnic backgrounds. Mary Shelley, along with Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, had been included for some time. However, only her first novel, *Frankenstein*, was much read, and it was categorized as gothic or horror fiction (see gothic fiction), genres often considered something less than high literary fiction. Critics such as Hartley Spatt later disputed the claim that gothic fiction takes a secondary position to that of romantic fiction. In addition, Shelley's importance to fiction is now supported through consideration of her entire body of work, not just *Frankenstein*.


Copyright © 2019 Infobase Learning. All Rights Reserved.