

Mr Bruff

ONLINE REVISION

MR BRUFF'S Guide To

'FRANKENSTEIN'



YOUR GUIDE TO
MARY SHELLEY'S
'FRANKENSTEIN'

THE COMPLETE NOVEL ALONGSIDE
MR BRUFF'S DETAILED ANALYSIS

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SAMPLE

Part 13: The Role of Women

As already noted Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was a famous advocate of women's rights. I believe that Shelley followed in her mother's footsteps, and there is much evidence to support this in the novel. Some could argue that the heavily male dominated plot, along with the fact that so many women die in the novel, makes it hard to argue for a feminist interpretation; I disagree.

Firstly, let me give you a few brief notes on the treatment of women in 1800s England:

- When a woman married, she became the legal property of her husband □
Women could not testify in court
- Women could not vote
- It was believed that women were incapable of rational thought
- Many female writers published their works anonymously or under male pseudonyms in order to boost book sales (Mary Shelley published 'Frankenstein' anonymously). Although women could publish, women's literature was not taken as seriously as that written by men. In order to be taken seriously, many women published anonymously.

There are a number of key quotations worth exploring in the novel in relation to the treatment of women. To begin with, let's look at how Frankenstein's father treated his wife:

"He strove to shelter her, as a fair exotic is sheltered by the gardener, from every rougher wind and to surround her with all that could tend to excite pleasurable emotion in her soft and benevolent mind".

This quotation suggests that women are like pets - it certainly doesn't suggest equality. There is also the idea that women are objects of pleasure to their husbands.

Throughout the novel, women are described in terms of their physical beauty. Even Elizabeth, when writing to Victor, describes Justine as 'extremely pretty'. In the same letter she writes about 'the pretty Miss Mansfield' and 'her ugly sister'. Finally, there is mention of 'a lively pretty Frenchwoman'. In stark contrast to this, none of the male characters is ever referred to as handsome, but are defined more through their intellect, such as when Robert Walton describes Victor as possessing 'unparalleled eloquence'. Here Shelley is pointing out the objectification of women which sees them as little more than objects of physical desire and gratification.

Even when Justine is facing her impending death, Victor's description of her is sordidly sexual:

" The appearance of Justine was calm. She was dressed in mourning, and her countenance , always engaging, was rendered, by the solemnity of her feelings, exquisitely beautiful".

Did you see that? 'Beautiful!' A woman accused of murder and waiting for her sentence is described as 'beautiful'.

It is frustrating to see Elizabeth so accepting of the way she is treated. On hearing that she is betrothed to Victor, she tells him "You well know, Victor, that our union had been the favourite plan of your parents ever since our infancy. We were told this when young, and taught to look forward to it as an event that would certainly take place". Here we see that Elizabeth seems to have no choice or opinion on the matter of her arranged marriage. Victor's view of the marriage is not much better.

Victor's proposed marriage to Elizabeth is presented as a business transaction, organised without any emotion, female involvement or mention of love by Victor who casually explains that "it was understood that my union with Elizabeth should take place immediately on my return". This theory is further enforced when he later talks about how he "might claim Elizabeth". Once again, women are seen as objects destined to provide pleasure for men.

So did Mary Shelley agree with this treatment of women? Absolutely not! Society at the time proposed that women were incapable of rational thought, but this is clearly disproven in the novel. When the sexist treatment of women is fully established, Shelley begins to challenge it. This is seen clearly in chapter 8 of the novel. At Justine's trial, the innocently accused speaks with such intellect and eloquence - Shelley has deliberately written a fantastic speech here:

" I commit my cause to the justice of my judges, yet I see no room for hope. I beg permission to have a few witnesses examined concerning my character, and if their testimony shall not outweigh my supposed guilt, I must be condemned, although I would pledge my salvation on my innocence".

Similarly, Elizabeth's defence of her friend is equally impressive:

"I am," said she, "the cousin of the unhappy child who was murdered, or rather his sister, for I was educated by and have lived with his parents ever since and

even long before his birth. It may therefore be judged indecent in me to come forward on this occasion, but when I see a fellow creature”.

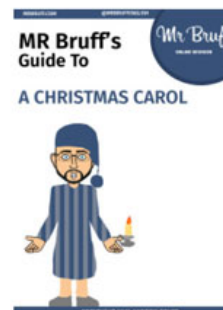
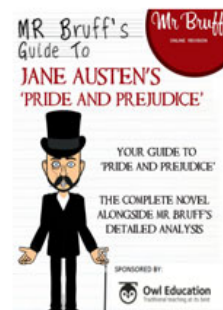
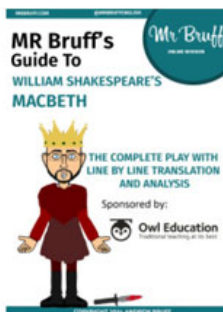
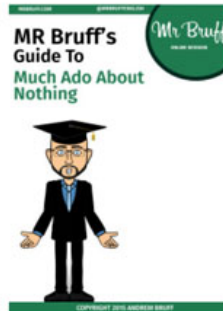
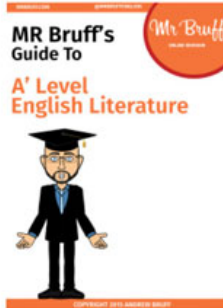
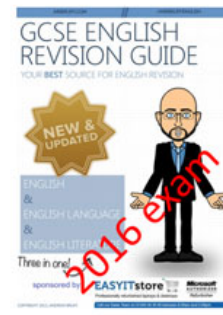
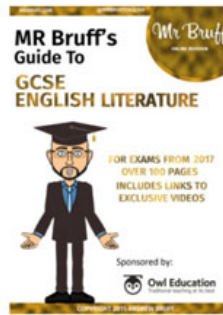
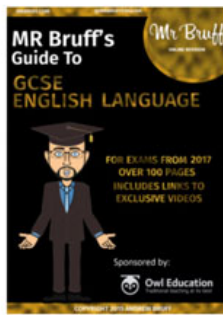
Remember, this was written at a time when women could not testify in court! Both Justine and Elizabeth present such rational, systematic lines of argument that they clearly outdo the males in the book. In fact, these are two of the most intelligent passages in the complete novel. Shelley is here showing just how intelligent and articulate women can be.

Having shown us how women should not be treated, the next female character we are introduced to gives hints at a better approach. Shelley's next female focus is the character of Safie. Safie is a character who is encouraged to challenge the treatment of women by her mother:

“ She instructed her daughter in the tenets of her religion and taught her to aspire to higher powers of intellect and an independence of spirit forbidden to the female followers of Muhammad”.

Encouraged by her mother to think for herself, Safie demonstrates a high level of independence. This is seen when she disagreed with her father's plans and “resolved in her own mind the plan of conduct that it would become her to pursue in this emergency.” Shelley uses the French character as a model of how English women should act and be treated.

Shelley further criticises the subject of male dominance when Victor thinks about the female creature he is planning on creating. Although the creature explains that the woman will do as he wants her to, Victor realises with shock that “she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation”. This line is one of the most significant when it comes to the role of women in society. Shelley is saying, through the observations of Victor, that women are individuals with their own minds, and the roles pre-determined for them by a patriarchal society, are unjust.



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