

Hello. My name is Christina Gambon, and for my round table discussion I will be talking about Mary Shelley and her influences when writing the novel, *Frankenstein*. In this novel, an ambitious scientist, Victor Frankenstein, breaks the boundaries of life and death in hopes of creating life from the dead, using both ancient and modern sciences. He finds out, unfortunately, that not everything works out the way it is planned. Shelley wrote her most famous work in 1818 after a contest for the scariest story, which was suggested by her friend, George, Lord Byron. A prime example of Gothic literature, *Frankenstein* has been read, formatted into films, woven into our culture, and used as a backbone for the plot of other novels. Shelley's novel that is such a large influence on our culture and literature was obviously influenced itself. In my thesis, I believe that her largest influences were her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, her father, William Godwin, and her husband, Percy Shelley. These three people represented different aspects of herself that she accumulated over the years and her views of the world she explored to the best of her abilities. Mary Shelley was born on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1797 to Godwin and Wollstonecraft. There were issues during delivery which led to Mary Wollstonecraft's death, robbing the young Mary her mother and the attachment she would later yearn for. Born to important leaders in literature and political activism, Mary Shelley must have felt like she was born to fill these impossibly large shoes. Her mother is known as one of the leading feminists in a time where women were not thought of as leading types, and her father introduced innovative ideas with his work, such as *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, in which he advocated for a society built on the logic of its citizens. The lack of a mother must have made her feel like she had a role to make up for the one her mother abandoned after her passing.

In my research, I am looking at the life of Mary Shelley, her relations with her father and family members, and her journey with some of the most famous Romantic writers of her time. I

am finding that her father was the one who contributed the most to her education, more than any school could do for her. At a young age, she was introduced to humanities, sciences, philosophy, and other subjects not typically taught to young girls. All she had of her mother were the works she left behind as her legacy and the journals her father later published for his wife posthumously. The lack of a mother is evident in *Frankenstein*, with Victor's mother dying in the early stages of the novel, as is the attempt of motherhood by the creator. Mary Shelley dealt with both these roles of motherhood, having lost her own mother and given birth to both a stillborn child and her first piece of literature. Her parents influenced her in ways that famous parents would, with great anxiety in her birth as an author and her view of the world; however, she was able to act out on these philosophies she built up, and eventually used in her novel, with her husband, Percy Shelley. Shelley himself was an avid fan of William Godwin and had a good relation with the philosopher, which was destroyed irrevocably when the former ran off with Mary. William Godwin didn't believe in marriage, more or less advocating for a relationship with another free of such commitments. Percy Shelley, an already married man, was infatuated with Mary Shelley and wanted to be with her, so he ran away from his wife to live out Godwin's philosophy with his daughter. Some researchers suggest that Percy Shelley was going to fall in love with Mary regardless of anything other than her name being "Mary"; being the child of both Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, both of whom were literature idols to many, made her very attractive to certain people.

The questions I've been having in my research concern Mary Shelley's relationship with her father primarily. It seems that there was a deep connection between the two, almost incestuous on the daughter's side. With her publication of *Matilda*, it doesn't seem to be that strange of an idea. *Matilda* is a novel about a woman whose father declares his love for her and

her issues following the confession. I want to look deeper into Godwin's works such as *St. Leon* and see if there are correlating ideas between that and *Frankenstein*, perhaps a critique of the elder's ideas. Godwin's work is about a French aristocrat who finds the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life, but rather than using these items for good, he ends up becoming an outcast from society. Both Count Reginald de St. Leon, Godwin's protagonist, and Victor Frankenstein are driven by ambition that results in the destruction of family. I also am looking at the role of motherhood in *Frankenstein*. Obviously, Victor is a mother figure, giving birth to a creature; however, he is unable to give it any true sense of identity. I'm researching the meaning of her portrayal of this man taking on a woman's role and the side effects that happen in relation to Shelley's own mother and her personal experience in motherhood as of 1818.

The sources I am using range from primary sources, like Mary Shelley's letters, to secondary sources, like biographies and literary analyses on *Frankenstein* and the author. There are many leading Shelley "experts" that I am looking into, like Anne Mellor and Miranda Seymour. My primary sources include letters from Mary Shelley to some of her friends, including Thomas Jefferson Hogg and Benjamin Disraeli. I also am looking at the works written by the figures I am studying such as *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Adventures of Caleb Williams* by William Godwin, and poems written by Percy Shelley. The secondary sources I am using for my research include *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, *Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Lady and her Monsters* by Roseanne Montillo, and *Mary Shelley: Her Life and Her Works* by Anne Mellor.

I would like to know your own interpretation of *Frankenstein*, a complex novel that tackles on so many different subjects.