

“A Matter of Circumstances”

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf ponders the plight of women throughout history. Woolf “reads the lives of women and concludes that if a woman were to have written she would have had to overcome enormous circumstances” (Woolf xi). Woolf’s initial thesis is that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 4). Throughout the book, however, she develops other important conditions for artistic creation. Woolf mentions many nineteenth century female writers in order to explain these conditions, but she does not mention Mary Shelley. Woolf most likely excludes the author of *Frankenstein* because her writing contains considerable male influence. The circumstances of Shelley’s life, however, meet Virginia Woolf’s basic requirements for the production of good fiction. Mary Shelley possesses a well-rounded education, encouragement, and an “androgynous and incandescent” mind (Woolf 98).

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf suggests women produce so little literature because of the tremendous discouragement and criticism that female writers face. She discusses the effects of opposition and disapproval upon the artistic mind. The opinions of others greatly affect artists, and it is those of genius who are most sensitive to criticism. Woolf proposes that it was literally impossible for a talented woman to write well during the sixteenth century: “A highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty” (Woolf 49). To further illustrate her point, Woolf constructs the tale of

“Shakespeare’s sister”: a sixteenth century woman born with a genius equal to Shakespeare’s. Rejection and discouragement from family, friends, and society fills her life. Because the world will not permit the expression of her genius, she eventually commits suicide. Woolf argues that like “Shakespeare’s sister,” any woman “born with a gift for poetry in the sixteenth century was an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself” (Woolf 50). Although the circumstances of female writers greatly improve over the next 300 years, Woolf finds that “even in the nineteenth century a woman was not encouraged to be an artist. On the contrary, she was snubbed, slapped, lectured and exhorted” (Woolf 55). Despite the great odds against her, a few women managed to disregard their discouraging environments and write successfully. The conditions that they overcame amaze Woolf: “What genius, what integrity it must have required in face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking” (Woolf 74).

Unlike most nineteenth century female writers, Mary Shelley is supported in her intellectual pursuits throughout her life. Although society discourages female writers, her family surrounds her with constant encouragement. Shelley comes from a background of famous radical writers. The political and moral writings of her father, William Godwin, are extremely influential during the time. Her feminist mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, writes the controversial book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. About her parents Shelley remarks, “It is not singular that, as the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity, I should very early in life have thought of writing” (Shelley x). Because Godwin believes that she had talent, his expectations of Shelley are high: “To be something great and good was the precept given to me by my Father” (Shelley xi).

Godwin's encouragement is later reiterated by her husband, Percy Shelley, a well-known poet: "My husband, was from the first very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage, and enroll myself on the page of fame. He was forever inciting me to obtain a literary reputation"(Shelley 6). Shelley's husband supports her throughout the writing of *Frankenstein*: "Percy was delighted that Mary had decided to put together a story of promise and as she wrote on encouraged her to develop it to novel-length (Shelley xviii). When she finishes, Percy Shelley edits the novel and adds some stylistic modifications (Shelley xviii). Mary Shelley is well aware of society's attitude toward women's writings, and publishes *Frankenstein* anonymously in 1818. Because of the dedication to William Godwin, many accredit the book to Percy Shelley. One critic observes: "*Frankenstein*, at the time of its appearance, we certainly did not suspect to be the work of a female hand; the name Shelley was whispered, and we did not hesitate to attribute the book to Mr. Shelley" (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, March 1823). Realizing the limitations of her society, it is likely that Mary Shelley leaves her work unsigned so that readers will take her message of the danger of experimental science seriously. Although nineteenth century society is unsupportive of women writers, Mary Shelley succeeds because she possesses continuous encouragement from her family, something very rare to most nineteenth century authors.

In addition to discouragement, Virginia Woolf proposes that poor education and a lack of stimulating life experiences contribute to women's small production of literature. Throughout history, most women have little access to formal education. Because of their expected roles, many women are not exposed to any literature. Woolf also believes that society denies women the chance to live the "invigorating life" that is beneficial to the

production of good fiction (Woolf 110). Most women stay home and cook, sew, clean, and raise children. In contrast, men could “live freely with this gipsy or with that great lady; go to the wars; pick up unhindered and uncensored all the varied experience of human life which served him so splendidly later when he came to write his books” (Woolf 70). According to Woolf, novelist Charlotte Bronte realizes the inherent shortcomings of women’s writing: “She knew how enormously her genius would have profited if it had not spent itself in solitary visions over distant fields; if experience and intercourse and travel had been granted her” (70). Woolf considers a well-rounded education important to the production of fiction.

Although she is predominately exposed to male literature, Mary Shelley obtains the well-rounded education that Virginia Woolf believes is beneficial to good novelists. In contrast to many previous female writers, her father greatly values education, and she is raised in an intellectually stimulating environment. Because her father is an influential thinker of the time, many famous writers and artists visit the Godwin house. Mary Shelley hears conversations and debates between her father and people such as William Hazlitt, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Humphry Davy, and Charles Lamb (Shelley xii). Growing up, Shelley reads many of the classics. It is evident that her literary exposure influences *Frankenstein* because the monster educates himself by reading *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch’s *Lives*, and *Sorrows of Werter*. Critics also point out slight influences of John Locke, Cervantes, Charles Brockden Brown, and Rousseau in *Frankenstein* (Shelley xxxii-xxxv). The intellectual stimulation in Mary’s life does not end when she leaves home and marries the well-respected poet, Percy Shelley. Part of her inspiration for *Frankenstein* comes from listening to a conversation between Lord Byron and Percy

“upon the nature of the principle of life and whether there was any probability of it ever being discovered and communicated” (Shelley xvi). In addition to Mary Shelley’s literary studies, wide travel experience furthers her education. As young girl, a friend of her father’s invites Mary for a long stay with him and his family in Scotland (Shelley xii). Several years later Mary and Percy Shelley “elope to the Continent” (Shelley xiv) and spend the year touring Europe. The Shelleys spend the next summer as neighbors of Lord Byron in Switzerland. Among the mighty Alps Mary Shelley envisions and begins to write *Frankenstein*. Although primarily male literature influenced her writing, Mary Shelley obtains a quality education and lives the “invigorating life” (Woolf 110) that Virginia Woolf believes benefits a good novelist.

Virginia Woolf insists that in addition to encouragement and a well-rounded education, women need an “incandescent and androgynous” mind in order to write (Woolf 98). Woolf explains, “The androgynous mind is resonant and porous; it transmits emotion without impediment; it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” (98). Shakespeare is an ideal example of an androgynous mind: “All desire to protest, to preach, to proclaim injury, to pay off a score...was fired out of him and consumed. Therefore his poetry flows from him free and unimpeded” (Woolf 57). According to Woolf, a lack of support and education prevents most women from writing with an incandescent mind. Bitterness and anger detracts from their writing. About Charlotte Bronte’s novels, Woolf writes, “If one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted” (Woolf 69). Jane Austen, however separates herself from her unsupportive environment and writes with an undistracted mind. Austen

writes “about the year 1800 without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching” (Woolf 68). Throughout *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf stresses the importance of an “androgynous and incandescent” mind.

Mary Shelley possesses the “incandescent and androgynous” mind that Woolf believes is necessary for the production of good fiction (Woolf 98). Shelley has no reason to feel anger, bitterness, or resentment. Although nineteenth century society does not encourage her, she obtains a quality education and possesses the continuous support of her family. Tragedy strikes her life years later with the deaths of Percy and three of her four children, but Shelley is content when she writes *Frankenstein*. About the novel, Shelley writes, “I have affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words, which found no true echo in my heart” (Shelley 10). Because of Shelley’s fortunate circumstances, she did not write with anger, fear, or resentment.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf’s initial thesis is that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 4). Throughout the book, however, she develops other important conditions for artistic creation such as a well-rounded education, encouragement, and an “incandescent and androgynous” mind (Woolf 98). Although Virginia Woolf does not mention Mary Shelley in *A Room of One’s Own*, probably because of the strong male influence in Shelley’s writing, the circumstances of her life meet Woolf’s basic criteria for the production of good fiction. Mary Shelley’s excellent literary education, stimulating life experiences, encouragement from family, and lack of anger, bitterness, and fear in her writing grant her the status of one of the most famous female writers of the nineteenth century.