

Elizabeth Lavenza: Device or Character?

*An audience response study to the evolution of Elizabeth Lavenza: from Mary Shelley's
Frankenstein to Kenneth Branagh's Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*

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Introduction

Frankenstein, or the modern Prometheus was first published in 1818 and considered progressive at the time. Its author, Mary Shelley, at the time of writing only eighteen, and at the time of publication only twenty-one years old, was “the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity” (Shelley), greatly encouraged by her soon-to-be husband to follow in their footsteps. Because of the popularity of the novel, Shelley published a revised version in 1831, to which she also added an introduction. The revised version differed in some ways from the original. The most notable differences are that many scientific aspects have been deleted in the later version because they had become subject of debate, and characters’ human actions are decided by fate in the revised version instead of driven by their own choices, as they are in the original (Mellor 170-173).

It has been posited that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* should not be read as a “work of literature,” but instead as a “product of criticism” (Hoeveler 60). This is emphasized in research from the 1970s and onwards, when *Frankenstein* was rediscovered by feminist critics. Since then, various feminist interpretations of the novel have been suggested. Though women have passive roles in the novel, scholars such as Mary Jacobus and Diane Long Hoeveler have argued that it is a critique on male superiority. Additionally, scholars such as Mary Poovey, Ellen Moers, and Barbara Johnson have pointed out that events in the novel were heavily influenced by Shelley’s personal life as a mother, daughter, wife and woman of great intelligence.

One might assume that Shelley, as the daughter of one of the first feminists¹, would incorporate a feminist message in her novel, challenge society’s views on women’s rights at the time, or at least incorporate a female voice in her work. Yet Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* is written from the perspective of three men. Each narrative, however, is strongly influenced by women. Captain Robert Walton’s narrative is influenced by his sister Margaret Saville, to whom he writes his letters. Victor Frankenstein’s narrative is influenced by his mother, by his family’s servant Justine Moritz, and by his adoptive sister Elizabeth Lavenza. The creature’s narrative is influenced by Safie and Agatha, who are part of the family he watches and learns from, as well as by Elizabeth Lavenza, whom he murders. For the creature it could even be said that his narrative is heavily influenced by the absence of a

¹ The word *feminist* was not used at the time, but from a twenty-first century perspective Mary Wollstonecraft is considered one of the first feminists.

mother, which has been suggested as one of the reasons for his murderous behaviour by feminist scholars such as Mary Jacobus (132, 133).

Considering the contributions of female characters to the story, their voices are notably absent from the novel. Elizabeth for example, has a very limited voice in the novel; she does not speak but is only spoken about. She does, however, criticize society at one point. During Justine's trial for a murder she did not commit, Elizabeth stands up for Justine. Another example is that Elizabeth stands up for her adoptive brother Ernest to their (adoptive) father (Mellor 176). Both instances can be considered criticism of society because Elizabeth goes against male authority and defends her own opinion. This was not accepted at the time. The second example, however, has been deleted in the 1831 revision of the novel. Elizabeth's voice is taken away almost entirely in the revised version.

Frankenstein has been adapted many times, the first adaptation being H. M. Milner's 1823 play *Frankenstein, or, The Demon of Switzerland* (Mellor xvii). The novel was first adapted to film in 1931, by James Whale. Since then, *Frankenstein's* creature has become a cultural phenomenon. Though it was a hugely popular adaptation, Whale's film cannot be considered faithful to Shelley's original work. As it was only an hour long, large parts of the original storyline were left out. Whale changed Victor's character from a man driven by his emotional past to create a living being, to a crazy immoral scientist. Furthermore, Whale's creature is far from the intelligent being he was in Shelley's novel. As many *Frankenstein* adaptations have since been inspired by Whale's film, their portrayals of Victor and the creature became very similar to Whale's portrayals, as opposed to how Mary Shelley had originally intended them. One of the more faithful adaptations, however, is Kenneth Branagh's 1994 film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. Though Branagh has also made considerable changes, particularly regarding Elizabeth's character, and has also used Whale's work for inspiration, it does justice to its title.

Commissioned by famous director Francis Ford Coppola, Kenneth Branagh was at first reluctant to take on the project of directing *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. Yet after reading Shelley's original story and realising the immense differences between the novel and the adaptations he had seen, he decided "he would make a movie more faithful to Shelley's original vision than any previous film" (White 166, 167). Upon Branagh's agreement to take on the project the screenplay was changed according to his wishes. Robert de Niro, though he

was unsure about working with a relatively inexperienced director like Branagh, agreed to play the part of the creature (White 168). Branagh took on the part of main character Victor himself.

The film, unfortunately, received some disappointing results and reviews: as White points out, “the enterprise proved to be poisoned chalice, damaging [Branagh’s] confidence, his professional standing, and his marriage” (165). Many scholars, however, were interested in Branagh’s adaptation, particularly from a feminist point of view (Hoeveler; Jacobus; Johnson; Long Poovey; Moers). Their articles often include a short analysis of Elizabeth’s character, yet focus mostly on Victor’s position in the story. In other articles there is an emphasis on Victor’s character and his relationships with the women in the story (Cotton; Hunter). Other articles focus more on the changes Branagh has made regarding Elizabeth’s character (Brannon; Laplace-Sinatra).

Branagh set out to make considerable changes, departing from the original story as well as previous adaptations, in the portrayal of the female protagonist Elizabeth (White 171). Though many feminist interpretations of both the novel and the adaptation have been published, few of these focus on Elizabeth. Furthermore, the authors’ scholarly views on both works in combination with their knowledge of film theory and research on both Mary Shelley and Branagh, have heavily influenced their viewing experience. Since no research has been done on audience response to Branagh’s adaptation, this study will show whether an audience that has less knowledge of film theory interprets Elizabeth’s character similarly. The essay will analyse the interpretations of what will be referred to as *casual viewers* of Branagh’s *Frankenstein*. In doing so the following question will be answered: to what extent has the female character Elizabeth Lavenza evolved from Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel to Kenneth Branagh’s 1994 adaptation, in the eyes of casual viewers.

The research question will be answered in the course of three separate chapters. In the first chapter background information will be provided on both the novel and the adaptation, this chapter will also briefly discuss adaptation theory. The second chapter will explain the method of the ethnographic interview of which the results will be presented in the third chapter. Lastly, a discussion and conclusion will be added.

1. Literature Review

1.1 The Novel

As is pointed out by several scholars, Elizabeth Lavenza is, as all women in the novel, a passive character (Jacobus; Labbe; Laplace-Sinatra). This is apparent in many parts of the novel. Victor sees the female Elizabeth as a possession; he dehumanizes her and regards her as animal-like and an object. Victor's mother introduces Elizabeth to him as a present, upon thinking back to this moment he says: "I interpreted her words literally and looked upon Elizabeth as mine". Victor describes Elizabeth as "the most fragile creature in the world. While I admired her understanding and fancy, I loved to tend on her, as I should on a favourite animal." Moreover, in the revised version of the novel Victor says the following upon meeting Elizabeth: "Since till death she was to be mine only" (Shelley). Additionally, as is noted by Michael Laplace-Sinatra: "Elizabeth remains at home and obeys Victor until her death, directly caused by Victor" (255). She can be considered a tool to further Victor's story arc instead of a character that stands on its own.

The only fragment in which Elizabeth's character stands out is, as mentioned before, during Justine's trial. Some scholars have based their opinion of Elizabeth on this event. Julie Sloan Brannon for example speaks of "flashes of intelligence and independence shown in Elizabeth's character in the novel" (14), by which she refers to this scene. She emphasizes the contrast between Victor and Elizabeth in this scene. By having created the creature, Victor is indirectly responsible for William's death, yet he is only worried for his own life. Elizabeth, however, fears for Justine and is not afraid to help her: "[w]hen she risks public censure as a woman speaking out of turn in the courtroom to defend her friend, [Elizabeth's] admirable loyalty stands in sharp relief to Victor's response." (Brannon 7)

Instances such as this show that, though Elizabeth is a passive character during most of the novel, she is also important to the plot of the novel:

It becomes clear that Shelley cleverly stresses her importance in the narrative and invites the reader to reconsider Elizabeth's place within the story with regard to Victor and the patriarchal society in which she lives . . . Elizabeth is an important character

in the novel because of what she represents, and indirectly criticises. (Laplace-Sinatra 255)

1.2 The Film

Since Elizabeth is a side character in a story that is largely told from Victor's point of view, it is difficult to know precisely how accurately Elizabeth's emotions and actions are described throughout the novel. This is different in the adaptation, however. An important aspect that Branagh wanted to incorporate in the film was the depth of Elizabeth's character. Instead of the passive character she is in the novel, Branagh insisted on giving her a mind of her own. On this subject he has said:

We felt it was crucial in a modern movie—especially of a novel by a great woman writer and the daughter of a very important feminist—to make sure that she is represented by someone who isn't just a 'love interest.' It's not an attempt to be politically correct. It's just very much more interesting, and more accurate about the current evolutionary state of relations between men and women ('Frankenstein Reimagined' 26).

Though Branagh wanted Elizabeth to be a better representation of a woman from the perspective of a modern audience, he did not want to make too many changes regarding Shelley's intentions with the character, which is why he chose to make changes in the relationship between Victor and Elizabeth in the novel, described by Branagh as "unequal". He explains: "We couldn't be strictly authentic to the period, because I wanted to say at every stage: "[t]hese two people are equal" ("Frankenstein Reimagined" 25)

According to multiple scholars, Branagh succeeded in creating an equal relationship between Elizabeth and Victor. In studies Elizabeth is referred to as, for example, "the decision maker" in the relationship (Laplace-Sinatra 255). Julie Sloan Brannon also notes that Elizabeth is "a perfect love interest for Victor, matched in every way" (13), which is the opposite of the novel in which she is presented as Victor's possession. Brannon explains:

In the film . . . Elizabeth is not presented as a gift, but as a companion. Victor's mother says, "You must think of her as your own sister. You must look after her. And be kind

to her. Always” The film then shows the young Victor and Elizabeth shaking hands, as equals, with the camera zooming in on their clasped hands as the scene fades. (14)

Helena Bonham Carter was chosen for the part of Elizabeth. This was a controversial decision, since the studio would rather have cast a Hollywood Star, because that would help promote the film and might make it accessible to a wider audience. Though at the time Bonham Carter was mostly known for British period dramas, Branagh insisted, and Bonham Carter was hired. She said on the subject: “They, the Hollywood backers, were not thrilled with having a Merchant-Ivory girl in the lead, . . . I’m sure they would have preferred a Hollywood name. I’m sure they would have preferred Arnold Schwarzenegger as the Creature. But Ken wanted me to play Elizabeth.” (White 171)

Another important aspect that was changed in the adaptation is Victor’s reason for creating his creature. This is an aspect that Branagh understood very well and which also made him change Elizabeth’s story arc; though in the novel her death is the end of her character, in the film she is brought back to life:

To highlight the complexities of the issues involved, Branagh proceeded to ask his cast: ‘Do you believe we should interfere with nature to the extent Victor Frankenstein did?’ Their unanimous response was that they did not. Putting a different slant on the dilemma, Branagh then said: ‘What if someone you loved died and, because of technology, you could bring her back to life? Would you do it then?’ this time all the actors said they would, as the issue becomes different once it is personalised. If that was the case though, Victor Frankenstein’s actions were fathomable; clearly he was no madman. (White 172)

Victor’s personal issues are much more emphasized in the film, which makes his motivation somewhat different. Branagh chose, for example, to show a scene in which Victor’s relationship with his mother is defined, followed by a scene detailing his mother’s death. When Victor, in the end, creates a female creature, the script differs from the novel in a similar way. Victor uses parts of Justine, a woman that he knew well, to create new life. While in the novel, Victor destroys the female creature because he is horrified by it, in the film he refuses to make a female creature because he cannot bring himself to destroy Justine’s

body. The only reason he makes a female creature in the end is because it is his only way of bringing Elizabeth back to life. As Branagh explained by having his cast answer some questions, Victor decides to do so because he loves Elizabeth. As is emphasized by Mark White, “[b]y emphasising Elizabeth’s worthiness, the risk involved in Frankenstein’s obsessive drive to create life – what he stands to lose – would be highlighted” (White 169).

1.3 Film theory

Adapted screenplays are considered to be different from original screenplays. When an adaptation has to conform to a different medium than the original, the story has to be changed accordingly. According to Linda Hutcheon “a novel, in order to be dramatized, has to be distilled, reduced in size, and thus, inevitably, complexity” (36). Frankenstein is a relatively short novel, yet still considerable changes have been made in Branagh’s adaption. When a novel is adapted to film the director has to make certain choices; aspects that are characteristic for literature cannot, or should not, be used in a film. For example, according to Hutcheon “telling is not the same as showing” (43). Hutcheon adds to this: “[i]f those manuals written for screenwriters are to be believed, realist film requires cause-and-effect motivation, basically linear and resolved plot development, and coherent characterization” (43).

Some important things to consider in film are camera angles and music. Music in film “functions as an emulsifier that allows you to dissolve a certain emotion and take it in a certain direction” (Munch qtd. in Hutcheon 41).

A first person narration, as is used in the novel, can also be used in films; either by voice over or by using specific camera angles. Many filmmakers, however, believe that these techniques should not be used in film adaptations because “that would be telling, not showing” (Hutcheon 53, 54), and would thus be inappropriate for film. In Branagh’s adaptation of *Frankenstein* there is no longer a first person narration: instead camera angles determine the focalization in each shot. Shifts in the focalization or point of view of the adapted story may lead to major differences (Hutcheon 11). The main focalizer is “the one who determines what [the audience] know[s]” (55). In the novel, the main focalizers are the three male protagonists: Victor, the creature, and Captain Walter. In the film, however, Elizabeth is also one of the focalizers.

2. Method of Research

2.1 Participants

The six participants were selected from the personal network of the researcher. All participants were female students between the ages of 20 and 23, and had considerable experience with the English language and with analysing English literature yet little experience analysing films. All fragments were provided in English; the researcher made a conscious decision to use the original text and the original audio, since connotations and interpretations in a translation may differ from the original. There was no concern of a language barrier since all participants were fluent in English. Though they were given the option to have the interview in Dutch, none of them chose to do so. The participants' information can be found in Table 1.

Participant number	Age	Gender	English Proficiency	Study Programme	Read the novel	Seen the film
1	20	Female	Fluent	English Lit. and Culture	No	No
2	21	Female	Fluent	English Lit. and Culture + Comp. Lit.	Yes	Yes
3	21	Female	Fluent	English Lit. and Culture	Yes	Yes
4	21	Female	Fluent	English Lit. and Culture	Fragments	No
5	23	Female	Fluent	English Lit. and Culture	Yes	Yes
6	22	Female	Fluent	Comp. Lit.	Yes	No

Table 1: Participant information

2.2 Materials

For the interviews, two fragments were chosen from the novel, and three from the adaptation. As Branagh has not specified which version of the novel he used as the basis for his adaptation, the novel fragments were taken from the original 1818 version of the novel. Not many important scenes involving Elizabeth were present in both the novel and the adaptation, therefore the choice was limited for research based on comparisons. For example, the novel fragment in which Elizabeth stands up for Justine during her trial did not occur in the film. Multiple scenes in which Elizabeth stands up for herself against Victor do not occur in the novel. The chosen fragments were the fragment in which Elizabeth reacts to the news that William is missing and then found dead, and the fragment in which Elizabeth is murdered. The former film and novel fragment will henceforth be referred to as *William*, the latter fragments will be referred to as *Wedding-Night*. After Elizabeth's murder, Elizabeth does not reoccur in the novel, but Branagh has made the interesting choice to have Victor resurrect Elizabeth and thus briefly continue her story arc. Elizabeth's final scene from the film was therefore also selected and will be referred to as *Suicide*.

The chapters from which the novel fragments were taken as well as the timing from which the film fragments were taken can be found in Table 2.

	William	Wedding-Night	Suicide
Novel	Chapter 7	Chapter 23	X
Film	1:15:31 – 1:16:00 1:17:16 – 1:18:02	1:39:13 – 1:41:15	1:47:49 – 1:50:13

Table 2: Chapters and timing for fragments

The document that participants used during the interview can be found in Appendix 1. It includes all novel fragments as well as additional information to the story that was offered to participants to fully understand the fragments.

William

In the novel, Victor's father describes Elizabeth's reaction to William's death in a letter, and asks Victor to journey back home to console Elizabeth:

She [Elizabeth] fainted, and was restored with extreme difficulty. When she again lived, it was only to weep and sigh. . . . Come, dearest Victor; you alone can console Elizabeth. She weeps continually, and accuses herself unjustly as the cause of his death; her words pierce my heart (Shelley).

While, in the novel, Elizabeth is described by Victor's father, the film shows her reaction to the news that Williams is missing, as well as her reaction to William's death. Though both reactions are similar, Elizabeth is more prominently present in the film.

Wedding-Night

The second fragment from the novel concerns Victor and Elizabeth's wedding night. Elizabeth is relatively absent in this scene as the narrator, Victor, is not present during the murder.

After a very short conversation between Victor and Elizabeth, he asks her to leave their room, and she obliges. Soon after this Victor hears "a shrill and dreadful scream" coming from Elizabeth's room. Upon entering her room he finds her dead. He then emphasizes her beauty by mentioning that she looks like she is asleep. The film, again, differs from the novel in the extent to which Elizabeth is present. The film shows Elizabeth's murder in detail, and it is much more gruesome than in the novel, since her heart is ripped out of her chest. Elizabeth's beauty is no longer emphasized after her death, though this is compensated by a scene preceding the incident, in which Victor and Elizabeth consummate their marriage.

Suicide

The last scene used in the interviews only occurs in the film. Elizabeth has been resurrected by Victor and is, both literally and figuratively, standing between Victor and the creature and is pressured to choose between them. Though she shortly stands with both men, she eventually commits suicide by setting herself on fire. This decision can be interpreted in different ways. Firstly, she actively defies Victor's wish for her to be alive again, since she has not been given a choice of whether or not she wanted to be resurrected. Instead she empowers herself by making the choice not to live on as the creature she has become.

Of all five fragments, Elizabeth's character is most three-dimensional in this last scene, although it should be taken into account that Elizabeth may not be the same person she was before her murder.

2.3 Procedure

To acquire information from the participants, ethnographic interviews were conducted, as described by Boeije. Ethnographic research is often used for qualitative research. Benefits of this method include the option for a researcher to participate actively in a conversation with the participant, as long as the researcher abides by certain rules such as being honest about his/her intentions (264-267).

The participants were asked to read two fragments from the novel and watch three scenes from the adaptation, of which the first two film fragments showed the same events as the novel fragments. The fragments were presented in the following order: novel fragment 1, film fragment 1, novel fragment 2, film fragment 2, and film fragment 3. The participants were given the information they would need to understand the fragments, which included background information on the story as well as an explanation on which actor plays which character in the film. They were then allowed to ask for more information if anything was still unclear. Participants were also given the opportunity to read or watch a fragment a second time, should they find this necessary, either immediately after reading or watching a fragment for the first time, or when they were not sure about the answer to a question. After each fragment participants were asked about Elizabeth's role: first they were asked to explain what they had read or seen and describe what differences and similarities they noticed between Elizabeth and other characters in the fragment, as well as differences and similarities between Elizabeth in the film fragment and Elizabeth in the novel fragment. Participants were also asked for their interpretation and opinion on Elizabeth's role in each fragment. The questions after each fragment were similar but adjusted to the fragment. At the end of the interview each participant was asked to answer some questions regarding all fragments. In some cases, questions were added to obtain further explanation from the participants; in other cases questions were skipped because the answer had already been given in reaction to a previous question. All interviews took place between 3 and 9 March 2016 and in places the participants would often use for studying; a café, and the university. Participants were asked permission to record them before starting the interview. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes.

The researcher took notes during the interview and transcribed salient quotes. Audio files of the interviews are available on request. The questions that were posed during the interview can be found in Appendix 2.

3. Results

The results of the interview will be divided into three parts. The reactions to the first novel fragment will be discussed in combination with the reactions to the first film fragment, as they show the same events. The same will be done for the second film and novel fragments. The third film fragment will be discussed separately. Lastly, the participants' reactions to all fragments as a whole will be discussed. By analysing the answers to the interview questions, it will become clear to what extent Elizabeth's character has evolved from Mary Shelley's 1818 novel to Kenneth Branagh's 1994 adaptation, in the eyes of a casual viewer.

3.1 William

In the first novel fragment, a letter from Victor's father describes the events that occurred when Victor's little brother William went missing, and was subsequently found murdered. The letter also discusses Elizabeth's reaction to both occurrences. The film fragment shows the same events, yet in a different way. Both fragments are largely determined by Elizabeth's emotions, which is the foremost reason they were chosen.

During the interview, participants often used the word *dramatic* to describe Elizabeth's actions, both in the novel fragment and the film fragment. However, when asked for their opinion on Elizabeth's reaction, many also pointed out that they did not believe she was overreacting and that her reaction did not markedly differ from that of other characters, especially in the film. Most participants ascribed Elizabeth's dramatic reaction in the novel to the fact that she blames herself for William's death, since she gave William the necklace that the family assumes was "the temptation which urged the murderer to the deed" (Shelley). Participant 2 pointed out that, considering that the novel was written in the early 1800s, it is unsurprising that there is a difference between Elizabeth's and Victor's reaction: "she [Elizabeth] is a woman, so she has to faint, and he [Victor] can't faint, as he's a man . . . I think that because she blames herself, she is of course more [affected by] the news, but also because women always faint in novels like [these] [i.e. Romantic novels]". At this moment of the interview the participant had not yet read fragment 2, in which Victor faints after finding Elizabeth's body. However, none of the participants commented on that.

Participants' responses to the first film fragment were different from their responses to the novel fragment. Participant 2, for example, used the word "overdramatized" to describe the

way Elizabeth emerges from the forest carrying the boy, in combination with her red lips, her pale face, and the thunder, as can be seen in Still 1. Participant 3 also commented on the director's decisions in this particular shot:

I think it's a bit peculiar that she is the one carrying the child, she's not going to be the strongest person there, it's probably for some filmic effect that she's the one holding that [child], because I think logically speaking she's not the one who would be carrying him, she's probably wearing heels and a dress. . . . Her clothing is very impractical, I mean, if you're [going to] hold the [child] and if you're [going to] walk through the forest like that, I think that that would not logically have happened.



Still 1: Elizabeth, in her wedding dress, carrying William from the woods (01:17:22)

All participants agreed that Elizabeth has a larger role in the film fragment because she is a more central character in the scene. Participant 1, for example, said: “In the novel I think that she was just there, while they [the search party] were looking . . . but now it seemed like she was the focus of attention, and she carried him out of the woods.”

Some also mentioned that the film focuses more on Elizabeth during the search (participants 2 and 3), and that she is “more involved in the search” (Participant 5) than she is in the novel. This can be seen in Still 2. Participant 5 also noted: “It’s funny that she is the one still in the woods while the men are all back at the house . . . So that’s quite strange, that she would be

the one, with all the search party of course, but still; the family, the rest of the family, is back at the house.” She adds to this: “the fainting, the sadness and the crying, that’s similar but . . . she manages to carry him all the way home . . . she seems more, sort of empowered and strong.”



Still 2: Elizabeth is the focus of attention during the search (1:15:54)

Though in both fragments Elizabeth is described as “dramatic,” her emotions are considered justified. The main difference that participants observed between the two fragments was Elizabeth’s presence and the significance of her character in the scene. The novel fragment is written from the perspective of Victor and Elizabeth is merely described in a letter. In the film, however, the camera focuses on Elizabeth and thus her emotions are shown more accurately.

3.2 Wedding-Night

The second novel fragment takes place on Elizabeth and Victor’s wedding night, Victor is anxious and Elizabeth is unaware of the reason. When she asks him what is wrong, he is unwilling to give her an explanation and asks her to leave the room. At the end of the fragment Victor hears Elizabeth scream, he enters her room to find her murdered. The film fragment differs from this in that the audience is shown exactly how Elizabeth is murdered, which makes the film fragment much more gruesome than the novel fragment.

In the novel, Elizabeth asks Victor what is wrong, but does not pursue the subject when Victor does not explain himself. All participants agreed that her reaction to Victor's agitation on their wedding night is reasonable, yet they also mentioned that she is very passive.

Participant 3 explained: "clearly . . . you can't see how she's feeling about this [Victor's agitation] and what her motives are for staying behind . . . but she asks very little questions I think. I'm not sure that's the most natural response in this situation".

It is apparent that Elizabeth is more present in the film fragment because the audience sees how she dies: "The death is more dramatic. In the book you only hear that she died, in the film you actually see how she dies" (Participant 4). Participant 2 added to this: "In the novel she looks like she is asleep, though here [in the film] she is covered in blood." Participant 3 explained that the novel is written from Victor's perspective, yet in the film the audience follows both Victor and Elizabeth. On the differences between the two fragments she comments:

[In the novel] they retain her beauty in a way, this sort of innocent beauty, because she's lifeless and she's cold but she's otherwise the same, she looks like she's sleeping, is what he [Victor] says, and in the film . . . her beating heart has literally been ripped out of her and then she's thrown from the bed and basically her hair is set on fire . . . It's much more violent as well.

Participant 2 explained: "In the novel she doesn't have much to say for herself, and here it is almost as if she can change her own fate . . . It seemed as if she had said the right words at the right time in the movie she could have changed his [the creature's] mind." Participant 6 pointed out that, contrary to the novel fragment, Elizabeth has a voice in the film fragment: "She gets something to say, she gets to plead for her life." This can be seen in Still 3.



Still 3: Elizabeth pleading for her life while pinned down by the creature (1:40:33)

Two participants, however, did not consider Elizabeth a more active character in the film fragment. When participant 4 was asked what words she would use to describe Elizabeth during her interaction with the creature she said: “Passive, yeah, that’s it, she’s just lying there.” Similarly, participant 5 said: “She doesn’t have a very big role, I think, in either one.” She then remarked that Elizabeth was used as a tool for Victor’s character arc, instead of having her own.

Though all participants observed a difference between Elizabeth’s role in the novel fragment and the film fragment, respectively, they did not all agree on the depth of her character in the latter. From the interviews it became clear that, though she is more visible in the film, as the novel merely shows Victor’s voice yet the camera follows both her and Victor, her character still cannot stand on its own.

3.3 Suicide

The third fragment is a scene from the adaptation that is not present in the novel. Instead of ending Elizabeth’s story arc with her murder, the film has Victor bring her back to life. The fact that the participants were not able to compare two fragments made the last part of the interview different. In the third fragment Elizabeth’s is standing between Victor and the creature. Elizabeth is no longer beautiful; she has scars similar to those of the creature and

does not fully understand what has happened to her. Victor and the creature seem to be urging her to choose between them.

All participants agreed that Elizabeth decides not to choose between the two men and chooses to kill herself instead, yet their interpretations of Elizabeth's reasoning behind this decision differ. Most participants gave more than one possible interpretation. Some believed that Elizabeth killed herself because she did not want to live with a maimed face and body (participants 2, 4); others said she would not be able to choose because neither men would accept her choosing the other (participants 1,6). The most popular interpretation was that she chooses herself instead of one of the men; she is unwilling to become the property of either man and unwilling to let them make decisions for her. In Still 4 Elizabeth can be seen making this decision.



Still 4: Elizabeth tears herself away from Victor (left) and the creature (right) (1:49:58)

While five out of six participants believed that Elizabeth's decision in the final fragment was self-empowering, participant 6 thought that the fragment was added to the story to further Victor's story arc by making him more emotional, which results in him making more drastic decisions.

3.4 Elizabeth as a Character

When asked which of the five fragments had given them most insight into Elizabeth's character, none of the participants mentioned a scene from the novel. Most participants chose the last film fragment, yet some changed their minds because they were not entirely sure if Elizabeth was still herself in that scene. Different reasons were given for choosing the last fragment; one being that Elizabeth makes the most choices in this scene in comparison to the other scenes, another being that she can be seen as the main character of this scene.

Other participants were of the opinion that Elizabeth's character was presented as most in depth in the first film fragment, in which William is missing. To describe Elizabeth in this scene, participants used words such as "relatable" and "genuine." The main reason that was given for choosing this scene was that it emphasised her priorities, her family, and as a result highlighted her role as a sister or mother figure.

All participants had similar views on the passiveness of Elizabeth's character in the novel. Participant three said the following: "there is no novel Elizabeth; I think in the novel she is not a character as much as a fantasy of Victor. She's more an image than a character, which is completely different from the film . . . She's mentioned in the novel but . . . she has no real voice, no opinions that I recall, especially in the fragments we read . . . She doesn't really act or control anything." In contrast, the film version of Elizabeth was considered much more three-dimensional: Elizabeth was said to have a much larger role in the adaptation, and her character was considered more empowered, genuine and relatable. One participant, however, did not agree with the others as she thought Elizabeth in the film not very different from Elizabeth in the novel: "she [Elizabeth] reacts mostly the same way [as in the novel]" (participant 4). However, participant 4 chose to disregard film fragment three in forming this opinion, since she believed that Elizabeth was no longer herself in her final scene.

The participants considered Elizabeth to be physically more present in the adaptation: she is shown in film fragments of which the novel's equivalent only shows Victor's perspective, leaving the reader with his interpretations instead of an objective view. While in the film Elizabeth is a side character, she can be considered the main character of some parts of the film. In the film, Elizabeth is considered slightly more three-dimensional than in the novel, yet she is still relatively passive. Furthermore, participants viewed Elizabeth as well-balanced

in the novel. Though her emotions and actions are often dramatic, they are plausible and realistic.

Discussion

Though feminist scholars have published many feminist interpretations of Mary Shelley's novel, there has not been done much research on Elizabeth's character in the novel *Frankenstein* in comparison to Elizabeth's character in one of its adaptations; *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*.

In the novel, Elizabeth is a passive character (Laplace-Sinatra; Labbe; Jacobus); her story arc is heavily influenced by Victor's: "Elizabeth remains at home and obeys Victor until her death, directly caused by Victor" (Laplace-Sinatra 255). However, "Elizabeth is also an important character in the novel because of what she represents, and indirectly criticizes" (255). This is emphasized in one scene in the novel, in which she shows her independence by standing up for Justine during her trial. This scene did not occur in the adaptation and was therefore not reviewed by participants. Participants therefore agreed with scholars that Elizabeth is a passive character in the novel, yet did not remark her intelligence or independence.

As an ode to Mary Shelley, who was the daughter of one of the first feminists, Branagh wanted Elizabeth to be a better representation of a woman from the perspective of a modern audience. In his adaptation, he intended to create an equal relationship between Victor and Elizabeth. He also wanted to emphasize Elizabeth's importance to the story: "to make sure that she is represented by someone who isn't just a love interest" (*Frankenstein Reimagined* 26). Though participants described Elizabeth as a passive character in the novel, words such as "realistic" and "self-empowering" were used to describe Elizabeth over the course of three scenes from the adaptation. This, to some extent, matches Branagh's intentions for Elizabeth's character in the adaptation.

When adapting a novel to film, certain changes have to be made. *Frankenstein* is, in part, told from the perspective of Victor. In films, camera angles determine the focalization in each shot. Contrary to the novel, Elizabeth is one of the focalizers in Branagh's adaptation. Participants noted that in multiple scenes, the camera focuses on Elizabeth. As a result Elizabeth is physically more present in the film and her emotions are shown more accurately than in the novel. This emphasizes the significance of Elizabeth's character in the film.

Though it has been suggested by scholars, the increase in Elizabeth's physical presence has not altogether diminished the passive nature of her character. In some instances she could still be considered a device to further the main character's story arc. From the reactions of casual viewers of the film it can be concluded that Branagh has, to some extent, succeeded in his intentions for Elizabeth in his adaptation.

Conclusion

Based on six participants' interpretations of two fragments from the novel as well as three fragments from the adaptation it has become clear that Elizabeth Lavanza has evolved from a passive character in the novel, to a three-dimensional character in the film. However, her character in the film is considered limited in the way that she is still, in part, defined by the main male character; Victor.

A limitation to the study is the amount of fragments that was used. Because the study focused on a small amount of excerpts, its findings may not be representative for either work as a whole. It was apparent that participants who had seen the film before were able to give more detailed reactions, as they were able to link aspects of the fragments they viewed to other aspects of the plot. Similarly, many fragments that were relevant to the study did not occur in both works. Though one of these fragments was included in the study, other relevant scenes were not considered by the participants.

Lastly, because the participants were students of literature they often focused on the way in which the film differed from the novel and were unable to consider the film as an independent product. This influenced the results.

The study should be repeated using more participants, as well as participants who have recently read the novel and seen the film. The latter would offer them full understanding of certain aspects of the story and a complete insight into Elizabeth's character.

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Appendix 1: Hand Out for Participants

Background information

At the age of 8, Elizabeth Lavenza was adopted by Victor Frankenstein's parents. In the fragments from the novel that you will be reading she is referred to as Victor's cousin and in the film she is referred to as his sister. Just before Victor left Geneva to go to university in Ingolstadt, Elizabeth and Victor became engaged. Since starting university, Victor has been obsessed with trying to create life. Elizabeth is aware that Victor is working on an experiment but does not know the exact nature of this experiment.

Frankenstein was written in 1818, the adaptation is from 1994.

Novel Fragment 1: William

Victor's little brother, William, is presumably, around the age of six. He lives back home with Elizabeth and the rest of Victor's family. William becomes missing and is later found murdered, upon which Victor receives a letter from his father that describes what happened. Henry Clerval, who is with Victor when he reads the letter, is Victor's friend and servant.

"My dear Victor,

(...)

"I will not attempt to console you; but will simply relate the circumstances of the transaction.

"Last Thursday (May 7th), I, my niece, and your two brothers, went to walk in Plainpalais. The evening was warm and serene, and we prolonged our walk farther than usual. It was already dusk before we thought of returning; and then we discovered that William and Ernest, who had gone on before, were not to be found. We accordingly rested on a seat until they should return. Presently Ernest came, and enquired if we had seen his brother; he said, that he had been playing with him, that William had run away to hide himself, and that he vainly sought for him, and afterwards waited for a long time, but that he did not return.

"This account rather alarmed us, and we continued to search for him until night fell, when Elizabeth conjectured that he might have returned to the house. He was not there. We returned again, with torches; for I could not rest, when I thought that my sweet boy had lost

himself, and was exposed to all the damps and dews of night; Elizabeth also suffered extreme anguish. About five in the morning I discovered my lovely boy, whom the night before I had seen blooming and active in health, stretched on the grass livid and motionless; the print of the murder's finger was on his neck.

"He was conveyed home, and the anguish that was visible in my countenance betrayed the secret to Elizabeth. She was very earnest to see the corpse. At first I attempted to prevent her but she persisted, and entering the room where it lay, hastily examined the neck of the victim, and clasping her hands exclaimed, 'O God! I have murdered my darling child!'"

"She fainted, and was restored with extreme difficulty. When she again lived, it was only to weep and sigh. She told me, that that same evening William had teased her to let him wear a very valuable miniature that she possessed of your mother. This picture is gone, and was doubtless the temptation which urged the murderer to the deed. We have no trace of him at present, although our exertions to discover him are unremitting; but they will not restore my beloved William!"

"Come, dearest Victor; you alone can console Elizabeth. She weeps continually, and accuses herself unjustly as the cause of his death; her words pierce my heart. We are all unhappy; but will not that be an additional motive for you, my son, to return and be our comforter? Your dear mother! Alas, Victor! I now say, Thank God she did not live to witness the cruel, miserable death of her youngest darling!"

(...)

"Your affectionate and afflicted father,

"Alphonse Frankenstein.

"Geneva, May 12th, 17—."

Clerval, who had watched my countenance as I read this letter, was surprised to observe the despair that succeeded the joy I at first expressed on receiving news from my friends. I threw the letter on the table, and covered my face with my hands.

"My dear Frankenstein," exclaimed Henry, when he perceived me weep with bitterness, "are you always to be unhappy? My dear friend, what has happened?"

I motioned him to take up the letter, while I walked up and down the room in the extremest agitation. Tears also gushed from the eyes of Clerval, as he read the account of my misfortune.

"I can offer you no consolation, my friend," said he; "your disaster is irreparable. What do you intend to do?"

"To go instantly to Geneva: come with me, Henry, to order the horses."

(Chapter 7)

Film Fragment 1: William

Victor's family realized that William, Victor's little brother, is missing. In the middle of the consternation Victor comes home, unaware of what has happened.

1:15:31 – 1:16:00

1:17:16 – 1:18:02

Novel Fragment 2: Wedding-night

The creature has asked Victor to create a female companion, a creature that is like him. When Victor refuses this, the creature threatens him: "I shall be with you on your wedding-night". Even though Victor constantly reminds himself of what the monster has promised him, he marries Elizabeth. In the following scene Victor and Elizabeth are staying in an inn during their wedding-night. Elizabeth still has no knowledge of the existence of the creature.

I had been calm during the day, but so soon as night obscured the shapes of objects, a thousand fears arose in my mind. I was anxious and watchful, while my right hand grasped a pistol which was hidden in my bosom; every sound terrified me, but I resolved that I would sell my life dearly and not shrink from the conflict until my own life or that of my adversary was extinguished. Elizabeth observed my agitation for some time in timid and fearful silence, but there was something in my glance which communicated terror to her, and trembling, she asked, "What is it that agitates you, my dear Victor? What is it you fear?"

"Oh! Peace, peace, my love," replied I; "this night, and all will be safe; but this night is dreadful, very dreadful."

I passed an hour in this state of mind, when suddenly I reflected how fearful the combat which I momentarily expected would be to my wife, and I earnestly entreated her to retire, resolving not to join her until I had obtained some knowledge as to the situation of my enemy.

She left me, and I continued some time walking up and down the passages of the house and inspecting every corner that might afford a retreat to my adversary. But I discovered no trace of him and was beginning to conjecture that some fortunate chance had intervened to prevent the execution of his menaces when suddenly I heard a shrill and dreadful scream. It came from the room into which Elizabeth had retired. As I heard it, the whole truth rushed into my mind, my arms dropped, the motion of every muscle and fibre was suspended; I could feel the blood trickling in my veins and tingling in the extremities of my limbs. This state lasted but for an instant; the scream was repeated, and I rushed into the room. Great God! Why did I not then expire! Why am I here to relate the destruction of the best hope and the purest creature on earth? She was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair. Everywhere I turn I see the same figure—her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier. Could I behold this and live? Alas! Life is obstinate and clings closest where it is most hated. For a moment only did I lose recollection; I fell senseless on the ground.

When I recovered I found myself surrounded by the people of the inn; their countenances expressed a breathless terror, but the horror of others appeared only as a mockery, a shadow of the feelings that oppressed me. I escaped from them to the room where lay the body of Elizabeth, my love, my wife, so lately living, so dear, so worthy. She had been moved from the posture in which I had first beheld her, and now, as she lay, her head upon her arm and a handkerchief thrown across her face and neck, I might have supposed her asleep. I rushed towards her and embraced her with ardour, but the deadly languor and coldness of the limbs told me that what I now held in my arms had ceased to be the Elizabeth whom I had loved and cherished. The murderous mark of the fiend's grasp was on her neck, and the breath had ceased to issue from her lips. While I still hung over her in the agony of despair, I happened to look up. The windows of the room had before been darkened, and I felt a kind of panic on seeing the pale yellow light of the moon illuminate the chamber. The shutters had been thrown back, and with a sensation of horror not to be described, I saw at the open window a figure the most hideous and abhorred. A grin was on the face of the monster; he seemed to jeer, as with his fiendish finger he pointed towards the corpse of my wife. I

rushed towards the window, and drawing a pistol from my bosom, fired; but he eluded me, leaped from his station, and running with the swiftness of lightning, plunged into the lake.

(Chapter 23)

Film Fragment 2: Wedding-night

The following scene portrays the same event: Victor and Elizabeth's wedding night. What you should know before watching this scene is that the creature can play the flute, and Victor is aware of this.

1:39:13 – 1:41:15

Film Fragment 3: Suicide

The following scene does not exist in the novel. After Elizabeth has been killed in the novel, Victor goes after the creature. In the film, however, Victor brings Elizabeth back to life. The creature assumes that Elizabeth is the female companion that he asked Victor to make for him. Elizabeth is confused.

1:47:49 – 1:50:13

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

Questions about the participant

- How old are you?
- What do you study?
- How proficient are you in English?
- Have you read the novel before, or fragments?
- If yes, when was this?
- Have you seen the film before, or fragments?

Question about novel fragment 1

- How does Elizabeth react to the news that William is missing?
- Is this different from the way other characters react?
- How does Elizabeth react to William's death?
- Is this different from the reaction of other characters?
- Do you feel like Elizabeth's reaction to William's death is fitting to the situation?

Questions about film fragment 1

- How does Elizabeth react to the news that William is missing?
- Is this different from the way other characters react?
- How does Elizabeth react to William's death?
- Is this different from the reaction of other characters?
- Do you feel like Elizabeth's reaction to William's death is fitting to the situation?

- What would you say is notably different in this scene in comparison to the novel?
- What would you say is different in Elizabeth's role in the fragment, in comparison to the novel?
- Can you think of a reason the director may have chosen to change these aspects?

Questions about Novel fragment 2

- How does Elizabeth act before the incident?
- Do you feel like the way she acts is fitting to the situation?

Questions about film fragment 2

- How does Elizabeth react to the creature?
- What words would you use to describe Elizabeth's character during the scene with the creature?
-
- What would you say is notably different in this scene in comparison to the novel?
- What would you say is different in Elizabeth's role in the fragment, in comparison to the novel?
- Can you think of a reason the director may have chosen to change these aspects?
- At the beginning of the scene you saw only ten seconds of the intimacy between Victor and Elizabeth. In the film, however, this part of the scene takes more than two minutes. Does this change your opinion of the scene? Does this change your opinion of Elizabeth?

Questions about film fragment 3

- What choice or which choices does Elizabeth make in this scene?
- Why do you think she make the decision she makes?
- Do you understand why she made this decision?
- Do you feel like Elizabeth's actions are fitting to the situation?
- Can you think of a reason the director may have chosen to add this scene?

Overall questions

- After having read and seen all fragments, which of the five scenes has given you the most insight into Elizabeth's character?
- Would you say that novel-Elizabeth is very different from film-Elizabeth?
- Why (not)?