Racial Reading of *Frankenstein*

In the summer of 1816, Mary Shelley and her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley visited Switzerland with Lord Byron and his physician-friend, John William Polidori. Instead of enjoying the clear and serene weather surrounding the lake and Alps, they experienced a "wet, ungenial summer" with "incessant rain" that confined them "for days to the house" (M. Shelley, *Introduction to Frankenstein, Third Edition*). As a result, Byron suggested they each write a ghost story. Despite being the daughter of two literary luminaries—Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin—Mary was yet an inexperienced writer. Still, she took up the challenge and sought to accomplish her writing eminence through a story that would "speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror – one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart" (Ibid). As the hours turned to days, Mary finally came up with her idea in a dream where she saw "with shut eyes, but acute mental vision…the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together…the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out…show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion" (Ibid). Thus, *Frankenstein* began.

It's the epic story of a gruesome monster brought to life in a creepy laboratory from the rotting cadavers of humans and animals. After months of toiling over his creation, Victor Frankenstein is appalled, not at his narcissistic ego which urged him to pursue such an undertaking, but at the ghastly figure before him. Discarded and alone, the creature attempts to merge with humanity, only to be rejected time after time. He then turns to the path of destruction; murdering helpless victims, burning down a cottage, lurking in the woods, across the river, peeking through the window…until finally, he decides to give up and commit the ultimate act of self-obliteration. He resolves to kill himself.

Surely, *Frankenstein* is a horrific tale that is ill-matched for the weak of heart. It pertains to Gothic devotees with every turn of the page. In addition, the story is rich in Romantic imagery and ideals. For example, the Romantic perception of seeking fulfillment through emotion and intuition rather than scientific innovation is apparent. Furthermore, the majesty of nature is another Romantic ideal seen throughout as a source of beauty, refuge, and renewal.

Still, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, first published in 1818, reflects more than Romantic ideals and Gothic innuendo; it presents a clear and unabashed reflection of nineteenth-century racial inequality in the Old World. From the beginning of the novel, the white scientist, Frankenstein, is physically contrasted with his creation, the yellow-skinned creature who is immediately deemed inferior based on his outward appearance. Anne K. Mellor asks in her essay, whether the "creature's yellow skin—together with the animal as well as human parts from which he is constructed—indicate that he is by his very bodily nature a degenerate being, both racially and evolutionarily inferior to his Caucasian creator, and hence necessarily a monster?" (Mellor). The answer is evident in several aspects of the novel, beginning with Robert Walton's fantastic dream of discovering a "part of the world never before visited" where he can explore the "unexplored regions" –a reference to colonial expansion which eventually included the mass abduction and slavery of darker skinned people, particularly from Africa and the Caribbean.

Furthermore, the reader learns of Victor Frankenstein's selfish desire to counter the *spiritual* conception, as well as natural order of female birthing by creating a foreign species, an 'other.' H.L. Malchow compares the hideous description of Frankenstein's 'other' to the "standard description of the black man in both the literature of the West Indies and that of West African exploration" (Malchow). Indeed, Frankenstein's creation of the 'other' mirrors the Old World's extraction of people from their homeland and transformation into subservient and deprived beings in a foreign land. In the end, Victor's Promethean is viewed as a degenerate being based on his non-white evolutionary existence. Thereafter, he vehemently denies responsibility for his villainy, claiming it was a direct result of merciless and inhumane treatment primarily from Victor for the abandonment, and subsequently by mankind which emphatically excluded him solely based on his physical appearance.

In his thoughts on the novel, Percy Shelley, the essential collaborator, wonders "what could have been the series of thoughts…the peculiar experiences…which conduced, in the author's mind, to the astonishing combinations of motives and incidents, and the startling catastrophe, which compose the tale" (P. Shelley, *On Frankenstein*). To compose *Frankenstein* effectively, Mary Shelley not only consulted her creative imagination and talented companions, she undoubtedly gained inspiration from the social and political atmosphere. Specifically, the creature's hideous form directly comments on the negative view of foreign people based on their foreign appearance. Furthermore, in the New World, Native Americans were possibly, as indicated by Karen Piper, an inspiration for the creature of Frankenstein. Piper writes that the "birth of the creature in Europe could be said to represent cultural fears of the invasion of the primitive in civilized society or the arrival of the colonized, in search of revenge, on the shores of the colonizer" (Piper). Indeed, in the early nineteenth-century, when travel between Europe, America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East was infrequent, and advanced modes of communication linking the world together were nonexistent, colonial expansion led to the narcissistic theory that darker skinned people were less than human, therefore predisposed for exploitation.

The physical appearance of the creature is critical to the story because it is by which his overall character is judged. His appearance is described in detail: "yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with the watery eyes…shriveled complexion and straight black lips" (M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*). While this may appear to be a repulsive image, it was "hauntingly similar to the way that explorers described the inhabitants of Greenland in Pinkerton's *Collection*" (Piper). In addition to the inferior physical description, newly "discovered" people were noted for their strength and agility, which also aptly describes the creature in the novel as he commands Victor, "Follow me; I seek the everlasting ices of the north, where you will feel the misery of cold and frost, to which I am impassive" (M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*). The creature also provides means of survival by leaving food, clothing, and shelter for Victor along the way. Still, in accordance with colonizing regimes, Victor denies this assistance as being sent from the creature and instead thanks his "guiding spirit for conducting [him] in safety to the place where [he] hoped, notwithstanding [his] adversary's gibe, to meet and grapple him" (Ibid). Paradoxically, the "guiding spirit" and the "adversary" are one in the same for Victor, yet he chooses to overlook this fact so he can continue in his pursuit of destructing the creature without sympathy or understanding for his plight.

Another example of the creature's exclusion from the Eurocentric world based on his physical appearance is when the De Lacey family boots him out of their cottage upon seeing his physical form even though they had accepted the firewood and assistance he had anonymously provided. The creature, who understood that he was physically different than the rest of society, nonetheless saw himself as "benevolent and good." His assistance to the poor De Lacey family points to his benevolence, especially since he did not expect any payment in return. His only desire was to be accepted for his character in spite of his physical appearance. "Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded…misery made me fiend," he says to Victor, pleading for a mate with which to share his life and perhaps find happiness.

H.L. Malchow, in his essay titled, "Frankenstein's Monster and Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain," points to the embedded messages that reflect "contemporary ambiguity or confusion about the rational other," as part of imperialist sentiment evident in the novel. He asserts that the novel depended, "at least for inspiration…on the coded language of contemporary racial prejudice" (Malchow). In the end, it is clear that this fictional novel, particularly the rejected creature, depicted the real life scenario of racially excluded subjects in the face of imperialism.

According to Karen Piper, in her essay titled, "Inuit Diasporas: *Frankenstein* and the Inuit in England," Mary Shelley was an avid reader of the *Quarterly Review*, which frequently discussed Arctic explorations and contact with inhabitants of the North and other indigenous peoples. This background reading led Shelley to envision a creature who neither fully exhibits features from one specific region, rather a combination of features from diverse regions. However, what unites this diversity is the notion that the creature is abhorrently denied acceptance and access to the European world and lifestyle due to physical disparities. He is constantly viewed as an unwanted outsider with no potential for society. From the beginning, explorer, Robert Walton, describes the creature, as a "savage inhabitant of some undiscovered land," indicating race as an important differentiating factor even for European explorers who seek to discover foreign lands and people.

As Walton notices the racial difference, he willfully decides not to stop and help the isolated figure or inquire further. At the same time, when he spots the emaciated, yet obviously European Frankenstein on the ice shortly thereafter, he offers to help and brings him onboard. Although the horrendous crimes of the creature are inexcusable, at this early point in the novel, Walton is yet to learn of this behavior, thus the reader clearly witnesses his racial profiling and preference for his own kind.

As Shelly worked on her novel, a sequence of slave rebellions shocked the British Empire. In her study on the forces of globalization, imperialism, and New World Slavery, Jessica Hale notes that "The enormous threat posed by what Britain perceived to be legions of non-white peoples insisting on independence parallels the monstrous threat posed by Victor's creation" (Hale). The creature acknowledges his place in society, yet abhors it, saying, "Mine shall not be the submission of abject slavery" (Shelly, *Frankenstein*). Shelley's portrayal of the creature reflects an accurate view of nineteenth-century attitudes toward non-whites as inferior and innately prone to slavery.

Victor's grave concern that his creature will procreate with a potential mate and produce "a new species" that "would bless [him] as its creator and source" alarmed him to the point of

ceasing to construct a mate for his creature that he feared may be "ten thousand times more malignant," leading to a "race of devils…propagated upon the earth who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror" (M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*). Although the creature threatens to be with Victor on his wedding night, Victor remains resolute in his decision to cease the creation of a mate. Thus, he puts his life on the line, but inevitably sacrifices his beloved, Elizabeth, just as he sacrificed his younger brother, William, when he abandoned the creature. For Frankenstein, the thought of his creature and potential offspring invading his treasured white world, posed a threat not only to his own well-being, but to the entire white race. This idea again reflects European fears of having a taste of their own medicine, so to speak, since while they were actively forcing non-whites to the shores of Europe as slaves, the abused were gradually gaining support and momentum for revolution.

Fred V. Randel notes the significance of geography in *Frankenstein*, in his essay titled, "The Political Geography of Horror in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein.*" Randel points to the idea that, "in modern European novels, *what* happens depends a lot on *where* it happens" (Randel). It is without question that Shelley chose the geographic locations to apply the "Gothic fear of being pulled back into a despotic past by exposing the despotic residue which, in her view, can shadow—but not stop—a potentially liberating, progressive process" (Randel). In other words, Randel believes that Shelley uses the locations of Ingolstadt, Northern Ice, Geneva, England, Scotland, Ireland, and Evian, to assert her desire to prevent continued inequality and revolutionary aggression "by motivating readers to overcome their prejudices sufficiently to accept fundamental reform" (Randel). Like her parents before her, Mary uses the written word to uniquely spread her message of reform.

In contrast to the notion that Shelley uses her novel to advance the rights of the underprivileged, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay titled, "*Frankenstein* and a Critique of Imperialism," views Shelley as "abundantly" identifying with Victor Frankenstein. In this essay, Spivak, a self-proclaimed Marxist-feminist-deconstructionist, discusses nineteenth-century British literature as being imbedded with imperialist sentiment. She writes, "It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English" (Spivak). Hence, even Shelley's unique Romantic/Gothic novel can be read as part of imperialist literature since it contains an 'other' who is rejected by society based on his racial difference.

Furthermore, Spivak asserts that Shelley's "political imagination fails" because although she "attempted to come to terms with the making of the colonial subject," as a white European, she cannot adequately identify with the plight of the colonized or account for his history, therefore is incapable of writing for the creature an optimistic future. Spivak points out that while a personal and familial history of Victor is relayed in detail, the creature, void of a past, must forge for himself a path to the future, even if this path conflicts with the path of his adversary. The creature indeed forges this path by teaching himself not only the basics of survival in the wilderness, but also how to read, write, and speak with eloquence. Allan Lloyd Smith writes that "The Creature's assertion of his literacy, and his human sensitivity, is emblematic of the breaking down of such boundary assumptions" (Smith). The same boundary assumptions were paralleled by slaves and indigenous people who were stripped of their voice,

language, heritage, religion, and homeland, and forced to create a new self-identity in the face of harsh colonialism.

Thus, while Shelley's *Frankenstein* criticizes the flaws of the colonial system, it nonetheless mirrors the prejudiced view of whites as superior to other races. Shelley's aim may not have been to pointedly address the issue of race in the face of imperialism, yet she provided ample proof that it was a significant concern facing nineteenth-century British society and would inevitably become an issue of diverse debate, eventually taking the forefront until it became officially and legally addressed. The creature recognizes his "deformed and loathsome" existence, "Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?" he asks himself in agony (M. Shelley, *Frankenstein*). This self-pity went against the European view of the racial 'other' as having feelings. Allan Lloyd Smith notes the perception that slaves were seen as "stoic even in torture and calmly smoking a pipe during martyrdom…it was reported in the *London Magazine* that Jamaican slaves smiled contemptuously while being burned alive" (Smith). This appalling comment points directly to the appalling view and lack of concern toward non-whites. They were not only seen as inferior, but as inhuman in their numbness and ability to withstand pain. Likewise, Frankenstein's creature was not seen as a man who would possess human desires and needs, but as a beast devoid of human attributes.

While Malchow sees the creature as most likely pertaining to the black race, he nonetheless acknowledges that Shelley may not have been creating a "specifically Negro monster," but rather a more ambiguous "threatening other" (Malchow). The yellow skin of the creature may also allude to the racially vague "mulatto" or Asian raider of the yellow peril. Anne K. Mellor agrees with this idea, suggesting that the creature is a "racial hybrid—a Caucasian body with Mongolian yellow skin, eye color, hair, and beardlessness." In Mary Shelley's eyes, "such a racial amalgamation might represent a positive evolution of the human species," where the possibility of future mating may occur between the white and non-white races" (Mellor). Either way, the creature was "identified as grotesque and of a lower order" (Smith). So although he may have been a benevolent and sincere creature, his physical appearance was inescapable, thus his life was doomed from the beginning.

Without a doubt, Shelley incorporates the Romantic ideals into her novel by emphasizing emotion and instinct over reason and intellectuality, as well as an appreciation of nature. Still, Shelley also aptly incorporates the Gothic with emphasis on the appalling and powerful creature that is out to destruct the serenity of the white world. Malchow sees the creature in *Frankenstein*, as a racial 'other' pouncing on already evident British fears of racial revolution. He asserts that Shelley did not create this novel based solely on her imagination, but relied heavily on the overall environment in Europe with ongoing slave rebellions and the fear of abolishing slavery. Malchow writes that, "In some sense the story of Frankenstein itself, the construction of the monster, is the fictional equivalent of the simultaneous construction of both race and racial prejudice" (Malchow). In other words, Shelley's portrayal of the creature as evil and destructive consequently allows him to act upon this projection and be treated with racial prejudice. Similarly, since slaves were viewed as subservient to their white counterparts, degradation was a learned and expected behavioral pattern.

Examining *Frankenstein* from a racial standpoint, it is easy to see it as a metaphor of slavery and colonialism with implications of racially charged issues clearly emerging. The

Eurocentric geography of the novel contains the truth about the ever more interdependent global economy of the nineteenth century which sought to use its power to branch out in non-white countries through domination and exploitation. One of the most apparent displays of racial discontent in the novel is through the concern over the monster's procreative potential. As Victor blatantly denies happiness and companionship for his creature, he actively pursues his own marital bliss with his future wife, Elizabeth. The creature's retaliation against this double standard comes to fruition as he murders Elizabeth in her bridal chamber. Just as Victor fears a new species growing out of control based on his actions, the Eurocentric world fears the retaliation of the subjugated slaves. The subsequent slave rebellions are paralleled by the creature's acts of vengeance. H.L. Malchow notes that when composing her novel, Shelley had read the works of Bryan Edwards, which report the horrors of slave rebellions, thus no doubt influencing her choice of expanding the creature's rebellion against his creator.

It appears that since the creature does not die by the end of the novel, Shelley has sympathy for his plight and as Kari J. Winter expresses, "leaves us with a faint hope that at some future time he will find a voice and place in the world" (Smith). And yet, the 'other' is ceaselessly refused entrance into human society, and humanity in general, leading to his subjectivity and destructive rage driving him to conclude that his misery will only end in his own death. By the end of the novel, his future along with that of the other non-whites remains inconclusive.

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