

# Retrospective Posthumanism: *Frankenstein* According to Our Vocabulary



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**Abstract:** Mary Shelley conceived *Frankenstein* as a Gothic horror story. However, Brian Aldiss claimed in 1973 that her novel is the true originator of science fiction—a 1920s label of which she could not be aware. Also in the 1970s, ‘posthumanism’ emerged as the critical current that might replace humanism. The word ‘posthuman’, though, had first appeared in a 1936 novella by H.P. Lovecraft. Because of this changing vocabulary *Frankenstein* must be re-read retrospectively (though not unproblematically) without neglecting its Gothic origins, as pioneering fiction about the creation of a posthuman individual, even of a whole posthuman species. In this article I argue that, nonetheless, the new posthuman re-reading should not obscure Mary Shelley’s intention to characterize her monster as an abject creature intended to produce intense fear and terror in her readers. This is an affect that has been lost in the contemporary academic treatment of the creature as a being dispossessed of his rights as a living individual.

**Keywords:** Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Gothic, science fiction, posthumanism

## 1. *Frankenstein* as a Gothic text: Horror and technophobia

In her Introduction to the second edition of *Frankenstein* (original publication 1818)—published in 1831 by Colburn & Bentley within their Standard Novels collection—Mary Shelley (1797-1851) narrated the genesis of her novel, thus establishing the enduring Romantic myth of its creation. During the cold, rainy summer of 1816,<sup>1</sup> nineteen-year-old Mary,

her husband Percy, and Claire Clairmont (the daughter of Mary’s step-mother), were frequent visitors at Villa Diodati on the shores of Lake Geneva, where Lord Byron was staying at the time with his personal physician, John Polidori. The Shelleys were in Switzerland at the request of Claire, who was then pregnant by Byron; she would give birth to their daughter Allegra in early 1817. Beyond sex, however, Byron did not care for

of the Lesser Sunda Islands in Indonesia. The events at Villa Diodati have inspired films as different as *Gothic* (1986), *Rowing with the Wind* (1987) or *Haunted Summer* (1988), and even the *Doctor Who* episode *The Haunting of Villa Diodati* (2020).

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<sup>1</sup> The Summer of 1816 was abnormally cold all over the Western hemisphere because of the eruption in April 1815 of Mount Tambora, a volcano in northern Sumbawa, one



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Claire; he clearly preferred Percy Shelley's intellectual company. According to Mary, the two men's conversations on scientific topics—which she claims to have witnessed without ever participating in them—together with Byron's proposal that the four of them (excluding Claire) wrote each a ghost story in imitation of the German horror tales<sup>2</sup> they were reading to pass the time, were major sources of inspiration for her novel.

Mary mentions in her Introduction that she had been writing since childhood but she still had a reluctance to believe herself endowed with the talent that Percy attributed to her, as the daughter of intellectual authors William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. She took, nonetheless, Byron's challenge seriously, making a constant effort to come up with a story that would be up to the expected standard: "One which 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" (8). Her difficulties to find a subject, together with Percy's and Byron's

pressure (she was asked daily whether she already had thought of a topic), caused a great deal of anxiety, which resulted in an agitated state or "waking dream" (9), one evening when Mary was trying to sleep:

I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision—, I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. (9)

Unable to get rid of her "hideous phantom", Mary chose this haunting vision as the subject of her "tiresome unlucky ghost story!" (10). It was her aim to terrorize readers in the same degree she had been terrorized by her imagination, or her subconscious. Initially, Mary wanted to write a short story but, encouraged by Percy, she expanded her tale into the novel *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus*, which she published anonymously. Since, because of this quite habitual circumstance, most readers and critics assumed that the novel had been written by Percy, Mary made a point of clarifying in the Preface to the second edition that everything in *Frankenstein* was her own creation, though she granted that her husband had written the Preface to the first edition of 1818.

*Frankenstein*, originally published by the small press of Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones when Mary was 21, fit well the literary market for Gothic

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<sup>2</sup> A key volume was *Fantasmagoriana* (1812), a collection of German ghost stories anonymously translated into French by Jean-Baptiste Benoît Eyriès. The main authors featured in it are Johann Karl August Musäus, Johann August Apel, Friedrich Laun, and Heinrich Clauren. Byron and Shelley never finished their own ghost stories but John Polidori did. His novella *The Vampyre*, the first prose narration dealing with this topic in English, was published in 1819. Unfortunately, *The Monthly Magazine*, where it appeared, attributed it to Byron, who was actually the inspiration for the horrid vampire Lord Ruthven. Polidori is rumoured to have committed suicide in 1821 because of this humiliation.



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fiction, a genre in which women writers were abundant—from the lesser ones published by the blatantly commercial Minerva Press (see Copeland, 1995) to best-selling Ann Radcliffe, who gave Gothic in the 1790s the literary respectability which the genre was missing. Horace Walpole accidentally invented the label ‘Gothic fiction’ by giving his novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764)—the text that inaugurated this narrative mode in Britain—the subtitle *A Gothic Story*. Walpole alluded to the pseudo-medieval atmosphere of his romance but the adjective ‘Gothic’ was eventually applied to any type of fiction (initially prose and drama, and later a long etcetera) interested in awakening the most universal affect: fear. As David Punter notes in his pioneering study of the genre,

Fear is not merely a theme or an attitude, it also has consequences in terms of form, style and the social relations of the texts; and exploring Gothic is also exploring fear and seeing the various ways in which terror breaks through the surfaces of literature, differently in every case, but also establishing for itself certain distinct continuities of language and symbol. (1980: 21)

In view of Mary’s avowed declaration that it was her intention to elicit a feeling of fear from readers, there is no doubt that *Frankenstein* is primarily a Gothic text, though not at all the ghost story she had set out to write. Her novel is, in any case, a late addition to the first cycle of Gothic fiction—*Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) by Charles Maturin is often named as its closing point—with very little respect for the habitual conventions of the genre. *Frankenstein* is neither set in the

remote past nor in a mysterious building (preferably a castle, convent, or haunted mansion). Although it does feature a romance (between Victor and his fiancée Elizabeth), this is secondary to the main plot. *Frankenstein* does not even have a villain clearly identifiable as such. Both Victor and his creation have been described as hero-villains or villain-heroes, an ambiguity which enriches this unique masterpiece.

Even though Victor Frankenstein originated the figure of the ‘mad doctor’ that would eventually appear in countless stories, from H.G. Wells’ Dr. Moreau to Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove, Mary herself was not attributed any main merit as a ground-breaking author for too long a time. English fantasy and science fiction author Brian Aldiss<sup>3</sup> was the first to argue, in his 1973 essay *Billion Year Spree*, that the Gothic nature of *Frankenstein* is no obstacle to read it as science fiction, quite the opposite. Calling Mary ‘the origin of the species’ (the title of his chapter), Aldiss exalts her to the position of main initiator of modern science fiction, a title that would certainly have surprised her, since this was a label created in 1926 by editor Hugo Gernsback.<sup>4</sup> Aldiss is right to connect

<sup>3</sup> In his novel *Frankenstein Unbound* (1973) Aldiss enacts through his delegate in the text, Joe Bodenland, the fantasy of travelling backwards in time to meet Mary Shelley. For the 1990 adaptation by Roger Corman, see my own article (Martín, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Scientifiction’ appeared in the editorial article by Gernsback written to present *Amazing Stories* (April 1926). “By ‘scientifiction’,” Gernsback clarifies, “I mean the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe type of story—a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision” (3). The magazine *Astounding Stories*



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science fiction and Romanticism since, thanks to the spectacular technoscientific progress that led to the Industrial Revolution, Mary's generation was "the first to enjoy that enlarged vision of time—to this day still expanding—without which science fiction is perspectiveless, and less itself" (1975: 3). Nonetheless, even though it is obvious that modern science fiction from *Frankenstein* onwards has frequently used horror elements—an outstanding early 20<sup>th</sup> century example is "The Color Out of Space" (1927) by H.P. Lovecraft, published in Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*—claiming that this genre is "characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mould" (8) is a risky manoeuvre. Despite this, many other critics have followed Aldiss. Goss and Riquelme, for instance, present *Frankenstein* as a villain similar to the classic aristocratic villains of Gothic fiction, calling him an "intellectual aristocrat" (2007: 425) since he is upper class but bourgeois (his native country, Switzerland, has no aristocracy). Gothic fiction, they add, "reaches an important moment of cultural realization in its offspring, science fiction, when the scientist replaces the ruler and the priest as wielder of power and source of wrongdoing" (435).

Whereas *Frankenstein* is a technophobic novel—whether we argue that Mary only opposed certain aspects of science or all of it—the abundant science fiction that lacks Gothic elements, and that Aldiss ignores, is technophilic. One

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of *Super-Science* (founded in 1930) was renamed *Astounding Science-Fiction* by its new editor, John W. Campbell, in 1938, who seems to have coined the label habitual today for this genre.

of the main technological optimists, as he called himself, is Isaac Asimov. In his hybrid detective/science fiction novel *The Caves of Steel* (1954), Asimov distances himself from Mary Shelley, whom he gently mocks, by introducing through the main robotics experts on Earth (in a future distant 3000 years from our present) a key concept. As Dr. Gerrigel tells Detective Elijah Baley:

"The human race, Mr. Baley, has a strong Frankenstein complex".

"A what?"

"That's a popular name derived from a Medieval novel describing a robot that turned on its creator. I never read the novel myself. [...]" (170)

The solution which Asimov found to the problem of how to prevent the rebellion of the robots, the famous Three Laws of Robotics that guarantee their obedience,<sup>5</sup> reveals that the trope of the creation of non-human, self-conscious artificial life need not result in horror tales. Brian Stableford was the first one to clarify why this is the case in *Frankenstein*. According to him, Mary did not characterize young Victor as a scientist because she wanted to comment on the scientific debates of her time but because she needed to distinguish her novel from the typical Gothic story of

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<sup>5</sup> The Three Laws of Robotics were suggested by editor John W. Campbell and introduced in the short story "Runaround" (1942). They are: 1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm; 2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law; and 3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.



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supernatural horror “which had already become tedious and *passé*” (1995: 54). If Byron had challenged her to write a tale about a ‘modern Prometheus’ (Mary’s subtitle for *Frankenstein*), Mary might have followed a very different course and perhaps present the creature’s awakening as “a joyous and triumphant affair” (54). The problem, of course, is that nobody would have published this imaginary alternative novel, which could only have been received as “horribly indecent and blasphemous” (56). Indeed, apart from Asimov, few if any authors have really overcome the Frankenstein complex. This is why Stableford characterizes *Frankenstein*’s enormous popularity as a tragedy trapping “the entire genre of science fiction” (56).

Generally speaking, there are two main lines of argumentation in relation to Mary Shelley’s technophobia, based in any case on a splendid knowledge of the main debates of her time, quite an achievement for a young woman of scant formal education. On the one hand, critics such as Andrew Smith maintain that *Frankenstein* is, despite its manifest, unambiguous horror, an ambiguous text as regards science. The novel does not belong to the agitated post-French Revolution period in which Mary’s parents expressed their progressive ideas, but to the far more conservative atmosphere which dominated Britain after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo (1815). For this reason, Smith insists, “the novel’s refusal to either fully endorse or extol radical views should be seen as part of the political ambiguities of the time in which radicals, such as Mary Shelley and her milieu, were unclear about where to go next” (2010: 81). The other main scholarly strategy consists of connecting Victor Frankenstein’s fictional

science with the real science of the period in which Mary’s novel is set, presumably the 1780s or 1790s (though Captain Walton’s letters are dated 17— it makes little sense to place the story in an earlier period). The noun ‘scientist’ only appeared in 1834<sup>6</sup> and since Victor refers several times to ‘natural philosophy’— science as we know it today was only consolidated in the final third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Cahan, 2003: 4)—Sutherland points out that he is no scientist, “mad or sane, but an Enlightenment *philosophe*” (1996: 25). Following this line of argumentation, Johnson (2018) examines the disciplines that were taught in the real-life German University of Ingolstadt (1472-1800) in Bavaria, where Mary places Victor as a student. Johnson notes that from 1780 onward this university had a large circle of scholars interested in the application of modern chemistry (Medieval alchemy’s descendant) to medicine. As he points out, though Victor mentions having studied physiology and anatomy, disciplines taught at the real Ingolstadt institution, he is neither a physician nor a ‘doctor’ in any field but just an advanced student of chemistry and electricity science with no degree.

This historical precision contrasts with the deliberate anachronism of statements

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<sup>6</sup> William Whewell first used the word ‘scientist’ in print in his review of *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences* by Mrs. Somerville for the *Quarterly Review*. He was actually reporting the occurrence which an “ingenious gentleman”, whose name he does not mention, volunteered during a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Since the word ‘philosopher’ sounded “too wide and too lofty a term” (59), this man proposed ‘scientist’ by analogy with ‘artist’ though, Whewell adds, “this was not found palatable” (59).



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such as “Speculation about the posthuman emerged in the Enlightenment in tandem with new notions of the human” (Yaszek & Ellis, 2017: 71). Obviously, the word ‘posthuman’ did not exist in the Enlightened 18<sup>th</sup> century which moulds Victor Frankenstein’s natural philosophy. Yaszek and Ellis use ‘posthuman’ with the intention of connecting the past with our present, confident that their anachronism will not be perceived as an error but as a productive strategy. Yet, though much is gained in this way, something is also inevitably lost, arguably an accurate perception of past *zeitgeists*. In *Frankenstein*’s specific case, the use of ‘posthuman’ in relation to this novel originally born as a Gothic text creates important tensions in the very definition of monstrosity, as I argue in the following section.

### 2. *Frankenstein* as a posthuman text: Gains and losses

*Frankenstein* survived as a popular classic at the margins of academic literary criticism until the publication of the collective volume *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley’s Novel* (1979), edited by George Levine and U.C. Knoepfelmacher. This volume was part of the then emerging Gothic Studies, consolidated thanks to David Punter’s *The Literature of Terror* (1980). Interestingly, the birth of this new research area overlapped with the beginnings of posthumanism as anti-humanist critical practice. The witty hybrid article by Ihan Hassan (half essay, half masque) “Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?” (1977) introduced the label as “a dubious

neologism, the latest slogan, or simply another image of man’s recurring self-hate” (843). Hassan warns that five hundred years of post-Renaissance humanism are coming to an end because the impact of the brutal technoscientific acceleration is transforming this intellectual current into something new “that we must *helplessly* call posthumanism” (843, original italics). Despite his negative tone, Hassan believes that “posthumanism may also hint at a potential in our culture, hint at a tendency struggling to become more than a trend” (843); it might thus become a tool for regeneration.

The problem is that posthumanism has exploded with such force and in areas of knowledge so diverse that it is impossible to agree on a single meaning. Francesca Ferrando’s *Philosophical Posthumanism* (2019), which offers a comprehensive overview of all its main currents, conveys the impression, most likely against the author’s intentions, that many scholars have used this label as randomly as postmodernism was used before and is still used. Ferrando, in any case, does her best to explain in a very useful, didactic way how the label has evolved. According to her (25-26), the Philosophical Posthumanism which she practices, as Rosi Braidotti’s disciple, descends from the Critical and Cultural Posthumanism developed between Hassan’s 1977 article and N. Katherine Hayles’s seminal volume *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). Another main highlight of this period, and the key text for Cultural Posthumanism, is Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” (1985). The volumes by Braidotti *The Posthuman* (2013) and by Stefan Herbrechter *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (2013) consolidated the current



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cycle, based on the premise that all Posthumanist critique must proceed “in relational and multilayered ways, in a post-dualistic, post-hierarchical praxis which sets a suitable way of departure to approach existence beyond the boundaries of humanism and anthropocentrism” (Ferrando, 2019: 119).

These critical currents have appeared in a historical period when real-life technoscience is moving ahead of science fiction, from which it often takes its inspiration anyway. This realization has multiplied almost to infinity the numbers of narrative descendants and of academic readings of *Frankenstein*. Feminist criticism, for instance, has condemned Frankenstein as a perpetrator of patriarchal technoscientific crimes which victimize women and children, even the monster. Far from being abject, as Mary imagined him, the monster is reconfigured in contemporary texts “in line with a posthuman trajectory of hybrid horror heroes from neo-Victorianism, graphic fiction, and familiar mashed myths of marvellously animated fantastic action” (Botting, 2018: 310). Braidotti’s views, according to which there is no division between nature and culture but a continuum (2013: 2), inspired Outka to state that “The creature disrupts the sublime formation of the human/natural binary, and in doing so changes the definition of both” (2011: 36). The use which Victor makes of animal parts (“The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials”, 55) has resulted in readings of *Frankenstein* as an anti-vivisection protest (Guerrini, 2008) about a fundamentally hybrid individual who is also a human animal (McQueen, 2014). On his side, Mousley describes Victor rather than his monster as a ‘posthuman

human’ because unlike the creature “who later imagines a life modestly accepting of the limits which his extraordinary circumstances have imposed” (2016: 161), Frankenstein feels “a ‘human’ desire to overcome his humanity” by refusing “to live within the boundaries of the human” (161-162), marked by disease and death.

Those of us who appreciate the virtues of science fiction are often frustrated by how the discourse on the posthuman, which is quite distinctly defined in this genre, is oddly distorted in disquisitions that do not take sf into account. Haraway pays homage to Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany, John Varley, James Tiptree Jr., Octavia Butler, Monique Wittig, and Vonda McIntyre as the true “theorists for cyborgs” (1991: 173), whereas Hayles presents in *How We Became Posthuman* critical analyses of Bernard Wolfe, William Burroughs, William Gibson, Philip K. Dick, Neal Stephenson, and Greg Bear. Braidotti, in contrast, develops her Philosophical Posthumanism in *The Posthuman* with no reference at all to science fiction. Ferrando just offers a few passing remarks in her own volume. It is important, however, to recall that, as Prucher notes (2009: 54), the adjective ‘posthuman’ first appeared in a novella by H.P. Lovecraft, *The Shadow Out of Time* (1936), in which it is used to describe the diverse alien species that will replace *Homo Sapiens* on Earth. This is still today mainly how posthumanism is understood in science fiction. Whether the new posthuman species (or, rather, post-*Homo Sapiens*) is extraterrestrial or terrestrial, natural or manufactured, is irrelevant: what matters is the concept of replacement. This, as I will comment, is fundamental in *Frankenstein*.

It is necessary to briefly consider at this point transhumanism, the



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intellectual and technoscientific current which defends the right to control the evolution of *Homo Sapiens* towards a new posthuman state, or even species. Julian Huxley, Aldous's brother and a first-rank biologist, with suspect eugenicist interests, coined in 1957 this concept in an often quoted passage:

The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself—not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way—but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps *transhumanism* will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature. (17, original italics)

The transhumanist project was initially developed as fantasy within science fiction but became eventually the object of heated technoscientific debate in real life. Haraway's call "for *pleasure* in the con-fusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction" (1991: 150, original italics) in allusion to the cyborg (a form of individual transhumanism) came only three years before the foundation in 1988 of the World Transhumanist Association led by Nick Bostrom and David Pearce. Their "Transhumanist Declaration" includes points as alarming as "(4) Transhumanists advocate the moral right for those who so wish to use technology to extend their mental and physical (including reproductive) capacities and to improve their control over their own lives. We seek personal growth beyond our current biological limitations" (1998: online). Transhumanists claim to embrace the main principles of modern humanism—a stance that may have made many anti-humanist converts—and to

hold no membership in any particular party or political platform. Yet, it is evident that their vision of the future depends on tracing an inhumane division between those who have access to anatomical enhancement and those who do not. On the other hand, it is relevant to note that a major line of research in Oxford University's Future of Humanity Institute, founded by Bostrom, considers the impact of advanced AI in our future. The institute's Centre for the Governance of AI devotes its efforts to ensuring that transhumanism stays within the boundaries of *Homo Sapiens'* evolution and is not overwhelmed by AI evolution.

Victor Frankenstein is, in our new vocabulary, a transhumanist ahead of his time since he intends to transcend the nature of *Homo Sapiens* to turn humans into a renewed posthuman species. His research is animated by the selfish, patriarchal idea that, if he succeeds, "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" (54). The methods which Frankenstein uses require, as Coleridge would say, our willing suspension of disbelief. However, the advances in technoscience have made Mary's novel "more relevant to apprehensive concerns omnipresent in the twenty-first century than it was in the nineteenth" (Friedman & Kavey, 2016: 12). There is no doubt that *Frankenstein* "perfectly illustrates [the] human anxieties of becoming posthuman" (Heiise-von del Lippe, 2017: 9), whereas its ending invites readers to consider "how a restricted notion of personhood has led to the denial of rights to a bioengineered being" (Karmakar & Parui, 2018: 351).



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Part of Gothic's sinister charms is its association with death and the ensuing bodily decadence, both presented as sources of disgust and terror. Victor passes from studying physiology and anatomy as part of his university training to manipulating dead bodies illegally obtained from cemeteries (cadaver dissection was limited to the bodies of executed criminals in the United Kingdom until 1832).<sup>7</sup> Victor claims he feels no superstitious fears but Mary Shelley aims at eliciting deep disgust with Frankenstein's narration of his experiments to Walton; these include examining in detail "every object the most insupportable to the delicacy of the human feelings" (52). Once he discovers the secret of how to animate organic dead matter, Victor starts using not just body parts but also living animals in these experiments. When he asks "Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil, as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay?" (54), the immediate reply is 'any minimally sensitive reader'.

Initially, Frankenstein doubts between creating "a being like myself, or one of simpler organization" but his overexcited imagination gives him the self-confidence he needs to create "an animal as complex and wonderful as man" (53). A crucial question often overlooked is the fact that

Victor's original design is faulty and that he has a limited plastic ability. "As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hinderance to my speed", Victor decides to work on a gigantic being, "about eight feet in height, and proportionably large" (54). Logically, his ignorance of modern microsurgery techniques cannot be solved by increasing the size of his creature. An eight-foot tall man can still look fully human—Gheorghe Mureșan, NBA's tallest player in the 2019-20 season, is seven feet seven inches, or 2'31 metres, tall—but Frankenstein simply does not know how to make his creature's various features cohere in a harmonious body. The poor aesthetics of his Adam are a consequence of Frankenstein's limitations as an artist and plastic surgeon, and they are the only reason why he is perceived as a monster. Victor tries to exonerate himself by arguing that "I had selected his features as beautiful" (57) but still cannot explain why the creature's physical appearance is so incongruous:

His 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 his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. (57)

His second main strategy consists of placing an insuperable dividing line, defining himself as human and his creature as a non-human monster. When his youngest brother William is murdered, Victor concludes at once that "Nothing in human shape could have destroyed that fair child" (76). When innocent Justine is wrongly accused of

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<sup>7</sup> William Burke and William Hare murdered in 1828 sixteen people in Edinburgh to sell their bodies to famed anatomist Robert Knox, who presumably new about their misdeeds. The scandal led to the passing of the Anatomy Act in 1832, aimed at supplying medical schools with sufficient dead bodies. Burke was hanged and subsequently his body was dissected. Hare's fate remains unknown.



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ending the child's life, Victor understands that "every human being was guiltless of this murder" (80).

Eventually, creator and creature meet in an isolated spot of the Alps. Frankenstein sees "the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed" (98). This comment transforms the novel's discourse on monstrosity by adding to the problem of the monstrous aesthetics the problem of the creature's augmented, superhuman capacities. He is far stronger than any man, can endure extreme cold, survive with very little food (all of it of vegetal origin), and has even self-educated himself in very limiting circumstances, just by observing how the De Lacey family speaks and reads. The new Adam (who never gets a name) insists that "I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and *humanity*" (100, my italics) but the violent rejection "from your fellow-creatures" (100), he tells Victor, forced him to accept his monstrous difference. This can never be overcome. Not even once he knows the creature's complete story can Frankenstein control the revulsion that his abject creature inspires in him. Among the accusations that the monster throws at his maker the main one is that he has been gifted with "perceptions and passions" (139) that make him aware of his terrible condition, even though Victor seems to have cared only for his anatomy and ignore his mind. The fact that this is a far superior achievement than the body condemns the monster, even to the eyes of his creator.

The motif of the augmented capacities of the monster is the foundation of the anti-posthuman horror that Mary Shelley activates in her readers' minds, even today. The creature argues that if any human being could welcome him, "I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears

of gratitude at his acceptance" (145), yet he has already concluded that "the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union" (145). The solution is the manufacturing of a female companion of the same type, with whom he could live quietly on a lonely corner of Earth, an arrangement which he defines as "peaceful and *human*" (146, my italics). Victor grants his wish but contemplating the half-made woman he is gripped by a fear that his "daemon" will want to have children "and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations?" (165). Imagining the passage from the posthuman individual to the posthuman species finally forces Victor to acknowledge that he had no right at all to start his transhumanist project. Understandably, the destruction of the female companion and, in consequence, of the possible new posthuman species, turns creature and creator into irreconcilable enemies. Since Frankenstein claims that he has broken his promise of making the woman because "never will I create another like yourself, equal in deformity and wickedness" (167), the monster attributes the betrayal to hatred without fully understanding the anti-posthuman fear that Victor feels.

Returning to Stableford, the problem with any readings of *Frankenstein* as fiction on the posthuman is that its plot depends on a questionable premise: Victor's act of creation produces a monster to fulfil the Gothic requirements of the novel rather than because he is a bad scientist (he is in fact a great scientist but a bad artist). Mary Shelley's constant preoccupation with the revulsion which



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the monster inspires hinders any deeper reflection on his posthumanity; besides, from the moment he first opens his eyes, the creature is characterized as non-human, eventually occupying an anti-human position. Contemporary readers may think that we might overcome our revulsion because we need to believe that we are better persons than Frankenstein, and because in our politically correct times the monster gets more sympathy than his maker as a member of a strange new posthuman minority. Yet, Mary is adamant that accepting this abject creature is simply impossible—our human senses, as the creature himself notes, are the final obstacle.

The contemporary reluctance to accept that the creature *is* a monster means, in short, that all readings which stress his posthuman nature misread the Gothic adscription of *Frankenstein*. Our visualization of the creature is contaminated by the inability to reproduce in audiovisual adaptation and in illustration the grotesque image which Mary Shelley gave him. With no truly accurate representation, it is easier to discuss how Victor abuses the creature and his rights as a man-made posthuman but only at the cost of missing a crucial fact: if we met the monster as the author describes him, we would also scream in horror. It would take much courage to control our reaction and sit down to discuss his predicament. Perhaps our softening of his monstrosity conceals a secret wish: that our present and future Frankensteins may have better artistic skills to transform us into the beautiful posthumans who will finally leave behind destructive, often inhuman, *Homo Sapiens*.

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