

Lessons from Monster(s): Postcolonial Feminist Analysis of *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*

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Dr. Frankenstein and his Monster have managed to keep audiences engaged in a near – constant renewal of academic ruminations for over two hundred years. Mary Shelley’s story of anguish and existential doubt begs big questions to even bigger societal problems. This agony is born of not belonging in a world – the patriarchal world of nineteenth – century Britain. As Charlotte Gordon notes, her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was deemed a “whore” and “hyena in petticoats” for mothering a child out of wedlock (xi). Shelley grew up motherless, as Wollstonecraft died shortly following her birth. She was later rejected by her father, William Godwin, for her illicit partnership with Percy Shelley (xvi). Her half – sister committed suicide upon discovering her own illegitimate conception (xvii). Britain’s patriarchal ideologies were not only wreaking havoc at home. At the height of its genocidal imperial projects, the crown brutalized millions of colonized peoples. The French Revolution had disrupted European life only decades before. The world, for Shelley, for women, and for the colonized, was a place of pain. Questions posed in *Frankenstein* continue to capture us because those oppressed under white supremacist patriarchy are still demanding change. The prescience of Mary Shelley has been noted by both feminist and postcolonial scholarship which examines the novel and its feminist and anti – imperial messaging.

Read side – by – side with Frantz Fanon’s groundbreaking work, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), there can be no denying the similarities of the existential anguish faced by the Creature and the colonized subject, documented by Fanon over a century later. Further, Shelley’s warnings offer striking parallels to contemporary Native feminist assertions of the gendered nature of colonization. Shelley’s criticisms of imperialist ideology are remarkably nuanced given the time in which she wrote; however, problematic colonial themes exist within *Frankenstein*. Do these theoretical

meditations offer insights useful to those concerned with ongoing imperialist projects? I argue that while *Frankenstein* imparts anti – imperial and feminist lessons, there are some ways in which Shelley’s work remains complicit in colonial thought.

Frankenstein’s story is nestled inside that of Arctic explorer Robert Walton, Shelley’s first anti – imperial motif. Walton can be read as a doppelgänger of Frankenstein; both are white men consumed with the possibilities of power within their respective scientific projects as life – giver and explorer (Robinson 218). Through them, Shelley critiques the male – driven projects of imperialism, rampant during her time, in which ethics become secondary to the pursuit of glory. Britain violently ruled about one quarter of the world’s land and peoples at its early nineteenth – century peak (Parker 286). Walton steers a ship, a traditional symbol of femininity, of Earth, through the perilous, icy, Arctic – a representative landscape of the unfeeling, rational, scientific, and wholly masculine mind. “Nature... is conceived as a female thing to be possessed and controlled by man,” notes Suparna Banerjee (4). Like Dr. Frankenstein, Walton has been obsessively planning his voyage “with resolve” for six years, seeking “glory” over even “the enticements of wealth” (Shelley 9). Upon meeting Frankenstein, Walton identifies with him immediately, just as much as his prejudice of the Creature is already apparent: “he was not, as the other traveler seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island, but an [sic] European” (Shelley 16).

The notable difference between the two men, however, is that Walton turns around once his men deem the voyage too dangerous. Dr. Frankenstein plowed ahead to the destruction of himself and everyone he loved. In Walton, Shelley offers audiences a potential alternative. His ethicality surpasses Victor’s. The psychological anguish of the Creature for being, in Walton’s eyes, a “savage inhabitant,” as viewed through a Critical Race Theory perspective, deepens the postcolonial potentialities of *Frankenstein*.

The word “savage,” traditionally used as a racist reference for Indigenous or racialized Others, also supports claims of the story as an allegory for the brutality of England’s imperialist “social mission” (Spivak 243). Much of the Creature’s

torment comes not from the fact that he was created, but from the rejection of both Victor and the De Lacey family. He sought love, companionship, and respect – perfectly human desires – yet he was repeatedly denied these based solely on his unsightly physical appearance. This rejection is irrational, base, and similar to racist rationalizations of the inferiority of non-white peoples by whites. In cataloging the psychological implications of colonization and racism in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon writes: “I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the ‘idea’ others have of me, but to my appearance” (95). The anguish oozing out of the pages of *Frankenstein* and that of Fanon’s colonized subject demands consideration of the effect racism has on colonized peoples.

The Creature, referenced by words like “wretch,” “daemon,” “devil,” and “monster,” is certainly considered subhuman (Shelley 111,161,163). These dehumanizing signifiers become the foundation of the Creature’s Othered identity in the eyes of all those he encounters. Fanon notes a similar phenomenon in the construction of the black in postcolonial societies: “... the Other, the white man...had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” (91). The Creature is stitched together with pieces of other decaying body parts; the colonized, racialized Other is created in the eyes of the colonizer with rotten, racist ideologies of inferiority and dirtiness. Postcolonial race philosopher Lewis R. Gordon notes that Fanon was able to see that “black is a white construction” (Gordon, Lewis). He points out the specific form of “melancholia” Fanon discusses, or the “bereavement from having been born of rejection,” of not belonging in a white world (Gordon, Lewis). Similarly, the Creature describes the “bitterest sensations” of “despondence and mortification” upon “becoming fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am” (Shelley 104). It is imperative to note the Creature’s depression is the result of a process by which he learns of his inferiority from Victor and the De Lacey family, not something implicit in his character. Fanon discusses this socialization of the black in the white world as a process of “alienation” from knowledge and love of the “Black self” to acceptance of the “black self” – the internalization of the white Other’s hatred (Gordon, Lewis).

The more the Creature learned of himself and the world around him, the more he saw “clearly what a wretched outcast [he] was” (Shelley 122). Hating himself, the Creature deeply desires assimilation into dominant European culture.

During the year spent stalking the De Lacey family, the Creature’s fantasy of acceptance and assimilation consumes him. Similarly, Fanon notes the desire for what he terms “lactification,” or the desire for whitening the race, born out of self-rejection in colonized peoples: “For him there is only one way out, and it leads to the white world. Hence his constant preoccupation with attracting the white world” (29,33). Through study of the De Laceys, the Creature deems them “superior beings, who would be the arbiters of [his] future destiny” (Shelley 105). The Creature has internalized his inferiority, identifying the De Laceys as paternalistic benefactors essential to his personhood; thus, the alienation process is complete. Though the De Laceys are portrayed as educated and loving, and Victor as hyperrational and superhumanly intelligent, the De Laceys and Victor are, in fact, incredibly hateful and illogical. Fanon reveals the Black man is often “detested by an entire race...[he is] up against something irrational” (97-8). Even after being subject to their humiliating degradation, the Creature still finds and entreats Victor to create a female counterpart with whom he may find acceptance and a shared life.

Through Victor’s power over the intimate, erotic, and reproductive capabilities of his creation(s), his symbolic identity of colonizer is cemented. In destroying the Creature’s female counterpart, Victor operates with the ruthlessness of many Euro-American colonizers during the reign of “white violence,” as Haunani Kay Trask has termed it, upon Native American peoples, especially women, in the “New World” (Trask). Native feminist theory asserts that colonization is always necessarily a gendered phenomenon (Arvin, Maile, et al). According to Andrea Smith, the sterilization of Native American women was a key piece in the stratagem of genocide (Smith). Victor sterilizes possibilities for reproduction in the Creature as well. This quite possibly may have been “the hapless fate of [the] original inhabitants” over which the Creature and Safie wept during their schooling on the “American hemisphere” (Shelley 110).

Despite the creature's promises of peaceful exile into the "wilds of South America," where he and his companion will subsist on "acorns and berries" and sleep upon "dried leaves," Victor fears the propagation of "a race of devils" and denies the Creature reproductive possibility (Shelley 137-8, 160). Shelley's generalized similarities of food and shelter to those of a pre-industrialized life, lived by many complex Native societies, indigenize the Creature and equate him with nature in a dualistically inferior comparison to the foods and habitations of "man" (137). Her questionable depiction of South America as uninhabited "wilds" is indicative of Shelley's British identity, which will be discussed later. Victor's grasp over the Creature's life has, at this point, conquered the Creature's psychological and bodily domains by sterilizing the reproductive opportunity through destruction of the female, thus eradicating the possibility for personhood through intimacy and/or children. Fanon's words about the colonizer are exemplified in Victor: "The white man wants the world; he wants it for himself. He discovers he is the predestined master of the world. He enslaves it. His relationship with the world is one of appropriation" (107). After repeated rejections and denials of his personhood, the Creature embarks on a project of violence and destruction modeled after what he saw in the actions of Victor: his creator, the colonizer.

"The black man is a toy in the hands of the white man. So in order to break the vicious cycle, he explodes" (Fanon 119). The Creature explodes by rejecting any further attempts to "inspire love," resolving to "cause fear" in a rebellion of Victor's control over him (Shelley 137). Of course, there are crucial differences between the colonized subject and the Creature – the former have long histories and complex cultures which the colonizer neglects to recognize; the Creature lacks these. These warnings, despite this, remain salient, especially in the settler-colony of Hawai'i. However, Shelley was a member of the greatest imperial force of her time; there are glaring ways in which *Frankenstein* reinscribes England's "social mission."

Eminent postcolonial feminist scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reads *Frankenstein* "as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating

colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" (251). Safie, like the Creature, is also constructed as a colonial subject and recipient of the "enchanted" freedoms granted her in English society (Shelley 115). Shelley is committed to demonizing the "Arab world" by its identification with Safie's father, the "treacherous Turk" and "follower of Mohamet" (116). Safie is redeemed by her "wondrously fair complexion" and allegiance to Euro-Christian values (107). Ian Balfour notes that the "proto-European" nature of Safie may be a way in which Shelley attempts to mediate this Otherness for her audiences (784). She and the Creature are depicted as equally othered in their ignorance. They graciously receive gifts of knowledge from the white man, Felix, despite Safie having lived (an apparently illegitimate) life prior to her arrival in rural Switzerland. Safie also undergoes "lactification" by assimilating into white language, values, and histories, portrayed as favors generously bestowed upon her by Felix, her White Savior (Cole).

The "Arab world" is written as backwards and oppressive, in dichotomous opposition with the enlightened European world of "grand ideas and a noble emulation for virtue" which include "higher powers of intellect," "independence of spirit," and "where women were allowed to take a rank in society" (Shelley 115). Safie is "sickened" at the thought of having to return to Asia (115). Ironic that Shelley spends much of the novel lamenting the lowly place of women in British society, only to glorify it in comparison to the "inferior" East. This "incidental imperialist sentiment," as Spivak calls it, is a perfect representation of the ways the East is (re)created and made inferior through what Edward Said has termed "Orientalist discourse" (Balfour 783, Parker 294). Spivak argues that mentalities of European exceptionalism are common in British literature, and "expose the colonizers' sexist and colonialist delusion of their own superiority over the people whose labor makes the colonizers' privilege possible" (Parker 302).

Further, Shelley is not entirely interested in critiquing the morality of England's colonial projects in *Frankenstein* as much as she is in critiquing the speed at which they are done: "Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change," says Victor to Walton, close to his death,

in a re-emergence of the imperial motif (Shelley 191). Imperial projects, undertaken too quickly, are the real harm for Shelley, not the imperialist sentiment behind them. Her defense of temperance and gradualism is hardly moral to colonized peoples. This willingness exhibited to sympathize with oppressors has been noted by scholars as a symptom of her British identity as well as by her proximity to the French Revolution, in which Shelley witnessed the despair of both the “dispossessed aristocrats” and the landless “common” peoples (Banerjee 12).

Shelley’s Orientalist discourse and political conservatism, though necessary to interrogate, do not entirely eclipse the anti – colonial messaging which readers can take from *Frankenstein*, even two hundred years later. In contemporary Hawai‘i, the latest iteration of imperialism disguised as science, the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) on Maunakea, compels audiences to read Shelley’s work as a warning for the dangers of science pursued outside of ethics. The literary function of monsters, as Jane Anna Gordon and Lewis R. Gordon note, is to “alert us to something we are doing that is unnatural” (30). It is unnatural to dehumanize, hate, and reject a being like the Creature based on appearance, just as it is unnatural to dehumanize, hate, and reject Indigenous peoples by mass sterilization and extermination. It is unnatural to reject the demands of Native Hawaiians by dismissing the deeply distressing effects of cultural and material genocide.

As Native Hawaiian feminist scholar, Lisa Kahaleole Hall reports, in Western culture, “knowledge is a possession, not something to which one has an ethical relationship” (32). Victor’s zealous intellect numbed him to ethics. It turned him into the truly unnatural monster – the colonizer. The proponents of the TMT are acting as “predestined master[s],” yet again attempting to “enslave the world,” as Fanon observed (107). We must move away from Western epistemologies of knowledge and science which are steeped in the same harmful ideologies of appropriation and ownership which remain the impetus for brutal colonial projects. We are offered the choice to learn from Victor’s mistakes, as Walton did, and put a stop to the legacy of white violence in Hawai‘i. We must use the lessons offered in *Frankenstein* and embrace

Indigenous approaches to knowledge which center ethicality within scientific discovery. The intellectual numbness of Western thought echoes the icy, Arctic planes in which Walton finds himself. He turns away from what Victor could not: the ravenous desire to possess knowledge, lands, and people.

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