Of Monsters And Men: Re-Examining Frankenstein As An Anti-Utopia

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Abstract:

Frankenstein, often hailed as the world's inaugural science fiction novel and uniquely crafted by a female author, has garnered acclaim for its captivating blend of gothic aesthetics, forward-thinking ideas, and masterful language. Published in 1818, the narrative serves as a cautionary tale, warning against audacious scientific experiments that disrupt the natural order. Moreover, it provides a critical examination of the prevailing male hegemony in realms such as life, literature, and art. Despite undergoing significant revisions in 1831, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein maintains its role as a potent critique, particularly directed at the idealistic pursuits of male-driven scientific endeavours and the marginalization of feminine creative power. The paper in question seeks to reevaluate the novel through the lens of an anti-utopia, asserting that the deliberately bleak and devoid-of-hope conclusion serves a purposeful narrative function. To support this claim, the paper delves into the historical context of the term "anti-utopia," drawing distinctions from its more commonly known counterpart, "dystopia." It aims to showcase how Frankenstein's concluding moments intentionally lack a sense of hope or alternative, suggesting that this narrative choice is not an oversight but a deliberate decision on Shelley's part. In building this argument, the paper will cite specific instances from the text, highlighting how the storyline evolves toward its eventual annihilate ending. It posits that within the context of the depicted circumstances, the bleak resolution emerges as the most logical and fitting solution to the problems presented in the narrative. Moreover, the paper will explore the idea that Mary Shelley's own shifting beliefs are reflected in the novel's conclusion, indicating a nuanced perspective on the consequences of unchecked scientific ambition and the imbalance of power between genders.

Key words: dystopia, gothic, aesthetics, hegemony, marginalization.

First published in 1818, later republished in 1823, and extensively revised in 1831, the novel Frankenstein has experienced a fascinating afterlife, mirroring the compelling narrative of its creation. Framed as a cautionary tale depicting a man's transgression and the ensuing consequences, Mary Shelley, the novel's creator, collaborated with her husband Percy Shelley to craft a saga portraying a scientist-creator's humiliating defeat by his own creation. This narrative, however, subverts gothic satire conventions, giving rise to an enduring cultural icon evident in numerous Disney movies and cartoons.

Initially a collaborative effort and later an individual endeavour by Mary Shelley, Frankenstein poses challenges due to its deceptive simplicity in plot and intended message. The seemingly straightforward storyline has led to contrasting interpretations of the terms "Frankensteinian monster" or "Frankenstein."

Over generations, people have consumed and propagated the cautionary message as a broad warning against various endeavours such as invasive scientific experiments, new enterprises, popular revolutions, protests, emancipation of slaves, and freedom movements.

The text's afterlife transcends its original author's intentions, evolving into a tool employed both by the powerful and privileged to suppress through its example, and by the oppressed and vulnerable to challenge the status quo through counterexamples. Remarkably, both interpretations have emerged from the same text.

Even long after its initial surge in popularity, Frankenstein remains a work that compels readers to confront not only the narrative itself but also their own thoughts, emotions, and personal histories. The Faustian trajectory that unfolds after the downfall of the protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, and the hinted demise of his created being, who surprisingly garners sympathy despite his destructive actions, evokes indescribable feelings of grief and sadness. These emotions transform the act of reading the novel into an unforgettable experience.

It is crucial to remember that Mary Shelley, merely 19 years old and coping with the loss of her first child, managed to assemble this novel while heavily pregnant. The work bears undeniable imprints from her personal life and tragedies, adding layers of depth to the narrative. Frankenstein transcends its temporal origins to become a timeless exploration of human experience, forcing readers to grapple not only with the story itself but also with the echoes of the author's own poignant journey. And as the circumstances changed further after its first publication in 1818, the 1831 version became an altogether new text, bearing newer influences from her life but "without compromising on her critique of the prevalent social conventions" (Rourke 379).

The original kernel of Mary Shelley's famous story, born from a ghost-story competition in gloomy Geneva in 1816, underwent significant transformations in the 1831 version. This edition marked Mary Shelley's evolution as a mature author, showcasing her growth over the years. In the 1818 version, she chose to remain anonymous, with her husband providing a generous preface. However, by 1831, after her husband's death, she took authorship and wrote her own introduction, falsely claiming minimal changes to the text. This has sparked ongoing debates among modern readers and scholars, leaving us to ponder Mary Shelley's creative process and intentions two centuries after the publication of her iconic novel.

The first half of the title, *Of Monsters and Men*, alludes intriguingly to Mary Shelley's creation, drawing attention to the anonymous sentient being and its creator. The use of "Monsters" and "Men" in the title suggests a complex relationship, challenging the notion of a simple binary between the two terms. As the novel progresses, our understanding of concepts like "human," "humanity," and "monstrosity" becomes nuanced and convoluted.

The central question emerges: Who is the true monster in Frankenstein? Is it the man who brought the creature into existence and then callously abandoned him? Or is it the being who, created and abandoned by his maker, grapples with rejection and isolation? This dilemma prompts a re-evaluation of what it means to be human and what constitutes monstrosity.

Moreover, the exploration extends to the characters themselves. Is the scientist, who eventually repents his creation, more human despite his initial hubris? Conversely, does the abhorred creature, capable of empathy for distressed and invalid humans, possess a more humane essence despite his physical appearance? *Of Monsters and Men* sets the stage for a nuanced exploration of the blurred boundaries between creator and creation, humanity and monstrosity, challenging readers to reconsider their preconceived notions about morality, empathy, and the essence of being human in the context of Mary Shelley's timeless work.

Despite being characterized in animalistic and non-human terms by his maker, Victor Frankenstein, the "creation" has mistakenly become a symbol that ironically reflects its creator, reversing the intended roles. Editor and scholar, Charles E. Robinson in the Introduction to The Original Frankenstein argues that "Mary Shelley purposefully gave him no name, forcing her readers to reveal their biases by denominating him 'monster', 'creature', 'creation', 'wretch', or 'demon.'" Among all these terms, I would continue to use the term "creature" for the unnamed sentient being to prevent confusion between Mary Shelley, the author of the novel, and Victor Frankenstein, the scientist-creator character. Additionally, by referring to him as a "creature," I aim to highlight his (physical) distinctions from other human characters, emphasizing his otherness and subsequent marginalization. This stands in stark contrast to Mary Shelley's own inclination, as demonstrated when she attended the first dramatic adaptation of the play with her father William Godwin, where she favored using a substitute for the character's name (Marshall 95).

In this analysis, the author explores the theme of utopia in Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" and how it undergoes a transformation throughout the novel. The paper aims to address three main areas: (a) the introduction of utopia in "Frankenstein" and its subsequent subversion within the narrative, (b) the consideration of whether "Frankenstein" can be viewed as an anti-utopia, and (c) the ways in which the text can be interpreted as such.

The argument begins by highlighting the critique of Enlightenment ideals in the novel, emphasizing the inherent opposition between scientific advancements and Nature with a capital N. The pursuit of knowledge and progress is presented as violent, hidden beneath utopian visions of development and God-like control. The author contends that as romantic figures and ideals decline post-Enlightenment, sustaining such ideas becomes increasingly difficult.

The paper is structured into two parts: the first part delves into the evolution of the terms "utopia," "dystopia," and "anti-utopia" over time. This groundwork is essential for establishing a clear understanding of these concepts. The second part of the paper focuses on "Frankenstein" as an anti-utopia, particularly analysing the final scene of the novel. The author emphasizes the use of the 1831 edition as the primary source, citing specific instances with Roman chapter numbers for clarity. By dissecting Mary Shelley's portrayal of utopia, the analysis aims to unravel the complex relationship between scientific progress, nature, and the consequences depicted in the novel.

Utopia, Anti-Utopia, Dystopia: A General Overview

The concept of "utopia" has been derived from Thomas More's 1516 work of the same name which has given us the understanding of utopia as an imaginary place that is better than the present society. Such a place gradually became associated with the land of bliss, equality, and communal-living, where the inhabitants do not have a cause to be jealous. They are neither competitive nor have exclusive rights over private property (Davis 40). In the 18th century, during Englan''s Enlightenment period, there was a simultaneous desire for an idealistic space and a cautious skepticism towards it. Put differently, it's not unexpected that both a longing for such an ideal space and a sensible skepticism coexisted during that era. According to Fátima Vieira, in her article "The Concept of Utopia," the so-called "trust
in man's capacities" was offset by the fear that perhaps "man was aspiring too high, which
would inevitably lead to his fall" (15). As a result, this skepticism gave birth to the opposite of utopia during the 18th century itself and came to be known as "anti-utopia" with the sense of utopia gone awry, in "opposite direction" almost (16). To quote at length from Vieira:

> If utopia is about hope, and satirical utopia is about distrust, anti-utopia is
clearly about total disbelief. In fact, in the anti-utopias of the eighteenth century, it was the utopian spirit itself which was ridiculed; their only aim was to denounce the irrelevance and inconsistency of utopian dreaming and the ruin of society it might entail. (16)

During this period, the anti-utopian sentiment carried a trace of optimism, presenting an alternative vision. Concurrently, the era witnessed notable revolutions such as the French and American revolutions. Despite the tumultuous aftermath, such as the Reign of Terror in France, there persisted a belief in the revolutionary capacity, fueled by influential figures like Godwin. This sentiment coexisted with substantial opposition

from figures like Edmund Burke. In simpler terms, even amid skepticism, there was a lingering hope in the transformative potential of these revolutions.

As the 19th century unfolded, there was a perceptible shift in perspectives, influenced by debates on slavery emancipation in England and the expansion of British colonial power abroad. The notion of an "alternative" began to diminish, possibly due to conflicting forces of emancipation and colonization. The emergence of a new genre, starting with Frankenstein, marked a transition from anti-utopia to what we now recognize as "dystopia" or the concept of a "bad place." Notably, the term "dystopia" had not been coined yet, and instead, "satirical utopia" and "anti-utopia" were still in use. The 20th century saw the independent development of "dystopia," distinct from "anti-utopia" in theoretical terms. This period also witnessed skepticism towards the genre of "utopia" itself, fueled by experiences with totalitarian regimes like the Soviet Union, Nazism, World Wars, the Cold War, technological advancements, and more. In simpler terms, the 20th century marked a clear separation between "anti-utopia" and "dystopia" amid significant global upheavals and societal transformations.

According to Gregory Claeys's book "Dystopia: A Natural History," there was a progressive divergence in the evolution of "anti-utopia" from the term "dystopia" or "negative utopia." Claeys outlines a gradual separation between these concepts in his exploration of dystopian literature. This shift can be traced back to Arthur O. Lewis who formally defined the term "anti-utopia" in 1961 as a depiction of a flawed society which is totally unacceptable to the author and the readers (275). Two years later in 1963 George Kateb described its three major premises, which were "the inevitability of violence in attaining utopian ends; the maintenance of such ends through oppressive regimes; and the destruction of many worthy values in the pursuit of others deemed more valuable" (277). And following Lyman Tower Sargent's arguments Claeys himself attempts to articulate the difference between the two terms wherein "the former [anti-utopia] reject utopianism as such, whereas the latter [dystopia] do not, or do so more obliquely" (290). Further, in the same book, Claeys argues that:

By the early twentieth century, 'anti-utopia' had emerged to connote 'all

fictions that turn utopian dreams into nightmares. [David W.] Sisk contends that 'dystopia' is preferable to 'anti-utopia' since it actually portrays the 'bad place' rather than merely satirizing the failed pursuit of the good one. Thus, 'all dystopias are anti-utopias, but not all anti utopias are dystopias.' (283)

The distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia hinges on the presence of hope. Dystopian narratives, while portraying grim futures, include an element of optimism, motivating readers to take corrective actions in the present. Thomas Moylan emphasizes that dystopias without alternatives risk becoming anti-utopias, devoid of any hope for positive change. Hope, therefore, plays a crucial role in differentiating and shaping discussions around these genres.

Frankenstein as an Anti-Utopia

In the novel "Frankenstein," Victor Frankenstein embodies the ambitious and rational scientific mindset of the Enlightenment era, driven to surpass the limits of nature through artificial means. His goal of creating life through scientific prowess places him in direct opposition to religious and divine authority. The scientific project, aimed at generating his own progeny or, in essence, a subservient being, is condemned in the 1831 version's introduction.

Initially, Victor epitomizes the enlightened ideals of reason and confidence in the physical sciences prevalent during the 18th century. The framing narrative by Walton portrays Victor as both deeply tormented and admirable. While recounting his story to Walton, Victor identifies with his listener, reflecting on his own youthful pursuit of scientific and imperialistic endeavors.

The novel hints at utopian ideals in Victor's early life, characterized by perfect and benevolent parents, a comfortable upbringing, access to extensive literature, and a Rousseau-istic education model. Victor's pursuit of scientific utopia extends to his experiments on dead bodies, driven by a desire to uncover nature's deepest secrets, an interest in electricity and galvanism, and a disregard for emotional and familial ties.

Victor's success in animating the creature marks a critical point where his unhealthy obsession with blurring the boundaries of life and death aligns with his utopic vision as a rational scientist. The novel's subtitle, "A Modern Prometheus," elevates Victor's stature to a mythical level, simultaneously foreshadowing the immense pain his achievements will inflict upon himself and his family. In the 1831 introduction, Mary Shelley further undermines Victor's utopia, emphasizing the destructive consequences of his ambitious pursuits.

Frankenstein as an Anti-Utopia

Victor Frankenstein embodies the ambitious and assertive scientific intellect, driven to surpass the boundaries of nature and challenge the conventional limits of possibility. His ultimate goal is to forge life through artificial means, putting him in direct opposition to the divine and religious realms. The scientific venture he undertakes, a quest to create life akin to birthing his own progeny or, rather, a subservient being, is condemned unequivocally in the 1831 version's introduction. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the novel, he personifies the rational and self-assured man of the Enlightenment era, firmly grounded in the principles of physical sciences.

In the initial stages of the novel, the first death within Victor Frankenstein's immediate family is that of his mother, Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein. This occurs while she tends to the ailing Elizabeth Lavenza, the adopted daughter and fiancée of the family. However, Victor appears less profoundly affected by his mother's death at this point compared to the death of his younger brother, William, who falls victim to the creature. William's demise triggers an irreversible deterioration in both Victor and his created "Adam."

Considering these elements and applying the lens of anti-utopia, as discussed earlier, I contend that "Frankenstein" is not a dystopia but rather an anti-utopia. This implies that the narrative presents no alternatives or hope in the face of the ethical and moral dilemmas it introduces. Despite portraying humanity's monumental failure in acknowledging its limitations and the societal issues leading to criminal behavior, the story does not propose any remedial actions or hints at potential solutions.

In opposition to this Anne K. Mellor, in her article "Making a 'Monster': An Introduction to Frankenstein," opines that neither the final hope nor the creature is lost in the 1818 version (21). By comparing the end scenes of the two versions, she argues that Mary Shelley's revision of the 1831 text has made it more fatalistic in overall tone, and thereby, making Victor less responsible for his deeds (Mellor 17). Mellor sees it as the move away from the originality of 1818 version, where Victor exercises his free will and through his active choices abandons the creature at its birth. Hence, she sees the difference between these two sentences as a marker of final hope: "he was carried away by the waves, and I soon lost sight of him in the darkness and distance" (1818) and "He was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance" (1831, Mellor 16). Mellor says: "Walton loses sight of him "in the darkness & distance," as Mary Shelley originally wrote, suggesting not only that the creature is still alive but also that his nature, his meaning, remains unfixed, ever available to new interpretations" (Mellor 21).

In my perspective, the variation in word choices can be attributed to the fact that in 1818, Mary Shelley was still influenced by her poet-husband Percy Shelley and her father William Godwin, holding optimism for future revolutions. However, this does not necessarily imply an absolute belief in a positive outcome. When comparing the two conclusions, I observe that the creature's contemplation of self-immolation or the potential for it, coupled with the wish to be forgotten in death, reflects a profoundly pessimistic outlook on the future. It serves as a strong critique of the entire utopian endeavor of creating the creature in the first place.

"But soon," he cried, clasping his hands, "I shall die, and what I now feel will no longer be felt; soon these thoughts—these burning miseries—will be extinct. I shall ascend my pile triumphantly, and the flame that consumes my body will give enjoyment or

tranquillity to my mind." (1818). "But soon," he cried, with sad and solemn enthusiasm, "I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away;

my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in place; or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus. Farewell." (1831)

The creature's discourse bears a striking resemblance to Fanny Godwin's suicide note, in which she expresses the hope that her death might relieve the suffering of others and eventually fade into obscurity. Intriguingly, this shared desire to be forgotten after death was initially confined to the creature's own memories in the earlier version. "He is dead who created me; and when I die, the remembrance of me will be lost forever" includes Victor too in the latter edition "He is dead who called me into being; and when I shall be no more, the very remembrance of us both will speedily vanish" (emphasis added). It is yet another debate whether the creature truly commits suicide or not? But as he himself articulates (like Manfred, the Byronic hero) death is the only way to find peace for him because his once noble life is irrevocably tainted by his crimes— "Polluted by crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death?" (Shelley Chap. XXIV). His ends do not justify the means, even though it was the society itself which turned this "noble savage" capable of honor and love, into a criminal.

And the politics of the times that influenced the writing of the text were such that post revolution while there was a genuine fear of the populace, there was also an on-going debate about the emancipation of slaves in England where the racial other was still seen as a threat by the upper-class white bourgeoisie. So, the creature has to die and so must the creator who gave birth to such an abomination in the first place because the racial other cannot be integrated into the English society. It was only in 1833, two years later than the 1831 edition, that abolition of slavery could be achieved in England. But by this time ambivalence can be discerned in Mary's own position. After suffering three more deaths of her children including one life-threatening miscarriage, the death of Percy Shelley in1822 and William Godwin in 1826, growing distance with former friends and family, Mary's personal sufferings coloured her revisions and additions of the text of 1831 (Mellor 16).

Despite being subtitled "Modern Prometheus" and containing allusions to Milton's Paradise Lost, there is no ultimate hope in Frankenstein. In contrast to the Biblical narrative where Adam is cherished by his creator, the creature in Frankenstein is abandoned and despised for its repulsive appearance. Victor, driven by a Promethean urge to rival the creator, pays the price for his transgression as he is haunted by his own creation. At every turn, Victor is portrayed as a tormented scientist whose idealistic vision of creating life turns into a horrifying reality.

The creature's painstaking yet futile efforts to learn language and seek companionship among humans partly affirms and then dismantles universal ideals of brotherhood. Victor, aspiring to be a god through his creation, becomes a pathetic fugitive, while the creature, desiring to be Victor's "Adam," is transformed into a "fallen angel" or specifically, a "monster." These instances undermine the utopian notions of technologically assisted birth and the potential father-son relationship in the novel.

The creature, born from Victor's ambitions, reflects more on Victor himself than the creature's supposed malevolence. Even in De Lacy's household, where the creature hopes to assimilate into human society based on empathy, intellect, and compassion, he is rejected by Felix de Lacy (Shelley Ch XVI).

Victor's decision to destroy the female companion the creature desires, out of fear of a dominating race and miscegenation, shatters the creature's hopes of acceptance in human society (Shelley Chap. XX). The text consistently critiques the overreaching ambitions of men and their treatment of other races and classes. It questions the failure of the enlightenment project, suggesting a lack of trust in human and scientific rationality, as proposed by Anne Mellor in her essay "Revisiting Frankenstein."

Mary Shelley may be satirizing her father, William Godwin, by exposing the negative potentials of an uncontrolled French mob, as suggested by James O'Rourke in his article "The 1831 Introduction and Revisions to 'Frankenstei'': Mary Shelley Dictates Her Legacy. The author's motives can be endlessly speculated upon. However, in a true Coleridgean fashion, where the Ancient Mariner suffers a life-in-death, both Victor and his creature endure the consequences of disrupting the natural order and societal status quo. The novel rejects the possibility of utopia, and neither is it a dystopia, as death is presented as the only

logical solution, either for Victor alone (1818) or for both (1831). In conclusion, Mary Shelley's exploration of human frailty at the core of Promethean endeavors turns Frankenstein into a deeply disconcerting anti-dystopian narrative.

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