Reconfiguring The Human–Nonhuman Boundary In Frankenstein And Frankissstein: A Posthumanist Perspective

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Abstract

This study compares Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818) and Jeanette Winterson's Frankissstein (2019) through the posthuman theory of Rosi Braidotti. It questions the traditional humanist belief that humans are autonomous, superior, and separate from other forms of life. Using close textual analysis, the research examines Victor Frankenstein's experiment and the Creature's emotional and physical suffering, alongside Winterson's exploration of artificial intelligence, cryonics, and emerging technologies. Through Braidotti's concepts of post-anthropocentrism and relational subjectivity, the study argues that both novels destabilize the boundary between human and nonhuman, natural and artificial. While Shelley anticipates these concerns in a nineteenth-century scientific context, Winterson revisits them within contemporary technological culture.

Keywords: Posthumanism; Human–Nonhuman Boundary; Identity; Artificial Intelligence; Anthropocentrism; Ethics; Technology; Relational Subjectivity.

Introduction

In the contemporary technological era, the traditional distinction between the human and the nonhuman has become increasingly unstable. Rapid developments in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, robotics, and digital consciousness have challenged the long-standing humanist belief that humans are rational, autonomous, and superior to all other forms of life. As technological systems become deeply integrated into everyday existence, the definition of what it means to be human is no longer fixed. These changes raise important philosophical and ethical questions about identity, agency, and the relationship between humans and nonhuman entities.

This study examines these questions through a comparative analysis of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818) and Jeanette Winterson's Frankissstein (2019) using the posthumanist framework developed by Rosi Braidotti in The Posthuman. Although the two novels are separated by two centuries, both texts explore the consequences of scientific and technological creation and question the boundaries between human and nonhuman life. In Frankenstein, the Creature represents a hybrid being that challenges Enlightenment ideas of human superiority and autonomy. Despite being artificially created, the Creature demonstrates emotional depth, moral awareness, and the desire for recognition, thereby questioning the criteria that define humanity.

Similarly, Frankissstein revisits these concerns within a contemporary technological context, where artificial intelligence, robotics, cryonics, and gender fluidity reshape the understanding of identity. Winterson's narrative illustrates a world in which technological mediation increasingly influences human existence and self-perception.

By applying Braidotti's concepts of post-anthropocentrism, relational subjectivity, and nonhuman agency, this research investigates how both novels blur the boundary between human and nonhuman life. Ultimately, the study argues that Shelley anticipates many posthuman questions in the nineteenth century, while Winterson extends these debates into the twenty-first century, demonstrating that the question of what defines the human remains a critical concern in an evolving technological world.

Literature Review

Posthumanist theory provides the central conceptual framework for this study, particularly through the work of Rosi Braidotti in The Posthuman. Braidotti critiques traditional humanism for constructing the human subject as rational, autonomous, and superior to other forms of life. According to her, classical humanism places humans at the center of knowledge and power, while animals, machines, and nature are treated as secondary. In contrast, posthumanism proposes a post-anthropocentric perspective that understands subjectivity as relational and interconnected with technological, ecological, and nonhuman systems. This theoretical shift challenges the idea of human exceptionalism and encourages a broader ethical understanding of life beyond the human.

Scholarly interpretations of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein have evolved significantly over time. Early critical readings often approached the novel within the context of Romanticism, interpreting it as a warning about the dangers of excessive scientific ambition and the limits of human knowledge. Later feminist critics, particularly Anne K. Mellor, emphasized themes of gender and reproduction, arguing that Victor Frankenstein's act of creation symbolically attempts to replace female reproductive power with male scientific authority. These interpretations highlighted how the novel reflects social and cultural anxieties surrounding science, gender, and power.

More recent scholarship has examined Frankenstein through the lens of posthumanism and technological theory. Scholars such as Cary Wolfe and N. Katherine Hayles interpret the Creature as a figure that challenges fixed ideas of identity, embodiment, and biological origin. From this perspective, the Creature destabilizes the boundary between human and nonhuman existence by demonstrating emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and moral reasoning despite being artificially created. Ecocritical readings also emphasize the novel's critique of Enlightenment ideals that promote human domination over nature.

Jeanette Winterson's Frankissstein has similarly attracted scholarly attention for its engagement with contemporary technological issues, including artificial intelligence, cryonics, robotics, and gender fluidity. Many critics view the novel as a postmodern reinterpretation of Shelley's text that reflects modern anxieties about biotechnology and technological enhancement. Some scholars interpret the novel as expressing transhumanist aspirations to overcome biological limitations, while others argue that it critiques the commodification of the body within capitalist technological culture.

However, although both novels have been widely discussed in relation to science, identity, and technology, comparatively few studies place Frankenstein and Frankissstein together within the specific framework of Braidotti's posthuman philosophy.

Research Findings

The comparative analysis of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818) and Jeanette Winterson's Frankissstein (2019) reveals several significant insights regarding the instability of the human–nonhuman boundary. By applying the posthumanist framework proposed by Rosi Braidotti, this research demonstrates that both novels challenge traditional humanist assumptions about identity, agency, and the superiority of the human subject. Although the two texts are written in different historical contexts, they present similar concerns about scientific ambition, technological power, and ethical responsibility.

One of the major findings of this study is that both novels question the idea that humanity is defined by biological origin. In Frankenstein, the Creature is created artificially from assembled body parts, which places him outside the category of natural human beings. However, despite his artificial origin, the Creature demonstrates emotional depth, intellectual ability, and moral awareness. He learns language, reads literature, and reflects on his own existence. These qualities challenge the assumption that humanity depends solely on biological birth. The Creature's experiences reveal that identity is shaped not only by physical form but also by social interaction and emotional development. This suggests that the boundary between human and nonhuman is socially constructed rather than naturally fixed.

A second important finding is that both novels illustrate the consequences of scientific ambition without ethical responsibility. Victor Frankenstein's experiment reflects the Enlightenment belief in the power of human reason and scientific progress. He seeks to control nature and create life, believing that scientific knowledge will elevate humanity. However, his refusal to take responsibility for the Creature after its creation leads to suffering and destruction. The tragedy in the novel arises not from the act of creation itself but from Victor's failure to acknowledge his ethical obligations toward his creation. This demonstrates the dangers of anthropocentric thinking, where humans assume dominance over life without considering the moral consequences of their actions.

Similarly, Frankissstein explores the ethical dilemmas created by modern technological advancements. Winterson's novel presents a world shaped by artificial intelligence, robotics, cryonics, and digital consciousness. Characters such as Victor Stein represent the transhumanist desire to overcome biological limitations through technological enhancement. The idea of uploading human consciousness into digital systems reflects the modern aspiration to achieve immortality through technology. However, the novel also reveals that these ambitions often reproduce the same humanist assumptions of control and superiority. Rather than challenging anthropocentrism, technological enhancement may reinforce the belief that humans can dominate life through innovation.

Another key finding of this study concerns the concept of relational subjectivity. Both novels illustrate that identity is not a fixed or autonomous entity but a process shaped by relationships with others. In Frankenstein, the Creature develops his sense of self through observing the De Lacey family and learning about human society. His identity is formed through experiences of rejection, loneliness, and the desire for recognition. These relational experiences influence his transformation from a benevolent being into a vengeful figure. The novel therefore suggests that social exclusion and lack of empathy contribute to the creation of monstrosity.

In Frankissstein, relational identity is explored through characters whose lives are deeply influenced by technology. The character Ry, for instance, represents the fluidity of identity in a contemporary technological world. As a transgender individual, Ry challenges the idea that identity is determined solely by biological characteristics. Instead, identity is shown to be shaped through personal experience, medical technology, and social interaction. This representation reflects Braidotti's concept of relational subjectivity, where identity is understood as a dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed essence. Another significant finding is the role of nonhuman agency in both novels. Traditionally, agency has been associated exclusively with human beings. However, both texts illustrate that nonhuman entities can influence events and relationships. In Frankenstein, the Creature gradually becomes an independent agent who acts according to his own desires and emotions rather than remaining under Victor's control. Similarly, in Frankissstein, artificial intelligence systems, algorithms, and technological networks shape human behavior and social structures. These examples demonstrate that agency is distributed across human and nonhuman systems rather than being limited to human subjects

Finally, this research finds that both novels emphasize the importance of ethical responsibility in a technologically evolving world. The instability of the human–nonhuman boundary requires new ethical frameworks that recognize the interconnectedness of human, technological, and ecological systems. Braidotti's concept of posthuman ethics highlights the need to move beyond human-centered thinking and adopt a more inclusive understanding of life.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that Frankenstein and Frankissstein both challenge traditional ideas of human superiority and fixed identity. By presenting hybrid beings, technological bodies, and relational identities, the novels reveal that the definition of the human is constantly evolving. These texts therefore encourage readers to reconsider the ethical implications of scientific and technological progress in the modern world.

Conclusion

This study examined Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Jeanette Winterson's Frankissstein through the theoretical perspective of Rosi Braidotti's posthumanism. The analysis shows that both novels challenge the traditional belief that humans are autonomous, superior, and clearly separate from nonhuman entities. By presenting hybrid beings, technological bodies, and evolving identities, the texts reveal that the boundary between human and nonhuman is unstable and constantly changing. While Frankenstein anticipates these questions within the context of nineteenth-century scientific ambition, Frankissstein revisits them in a modern technological world shaped by artificial intelligence and biotechnology. Together, the novels emphasize the need for ethical responsibility and relational thinking in understanding human identity.

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