

# Why Posthuman? A Relook At The Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

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## Abstract

One of the earliest forms of literature which would in the twenty-first century qualify as a science fiction, speculative fiction or for that matter even a posthuman novella brings out important examination on the necessity to look beyond the human condition. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* written by a young girl of nineteen years stands as a stalwart in literary history evoking introspection on man's desire to overreach in the dark alleys beyond human perceptible control. And yet posthuman is a fictitious reality in the human mind touching the vast possibility of scientific research and a desire to control and manipulate the natural order of life. Yet life beyond the biological process can be achieved as has been observed in scientific manipulation of plant life, creating and generating hybrid forms for a possibly better or a more strengthened form to battle changing climactic conditions. Does the pursuit of posthuman also aim for such heights to combat the changing landscape of life on earth? Or is it merely what Pico della Mirandola spoke of in the context of human abilities in "Oration on the Dignity of Man"?

Early in the novella we become aware of Victor Frankenstein, a bourgeoisie intellectual aristocrat, armed with a Faustian desire to be able to create human life, he has abandoned all human company and association, emerging as an isolated figure deeply involved in his forbidden experiment. He visits graveyards, unburying dead bodies to create a disparately combined figure. The motivation for him lies in his intense desire to create a "new species" which would bless him as its creator as a father who could make the sole claim and responsibility of his child. But most importantly "most happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me." Ingrained within is the dissatisfactory nature of the human condition which aims to "correct" the faults to rectify the imperfections and deficiencies to "improve". Frankenstein is the Promethean figure, one who has deliberately chosen to disobey the laws of nature to stimulate the forbidden. Located within the backdrop of the French Revolution the novella also resonates within political and social contexts of its times signifying the loss of revolutionary changes that it hoped to bring about.

As we stand here in the twenty-first century Frankenstein's experiments does not appear to be either forbidden nor unachievable. Yet Frankenstein's position as a ruthless manipulator who desires control and command becomes a crucial point of meditation on cultural realisation of the parameters of scientific position and paralysis. The novella ends in the death of the creator and the created positing a deep consciousness of an apocalyptic conclusion to a priest who wields power and becomes a source of wrongdoing. In my paper I aim to look at the novella *Frankenstein* by contextualising it as a landmark piece of literature which attempts to relook and probably come up with answers that can lay heavy on man's attempts at controlling nature.

**Keywords:** Gothic fiction, Posthuman, hybridity, experimentation, Faustian desire

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## I. Introduction

In fairly recent studies posthuman as a possible discipline of study is steadily emerging with the realisation of the precariousness of human life on earth. This study focusses on a non-anthropocentric worldview that reimagines the way in which human civilisation has dominated and created a narrative around humanness. The entire history of human civilisation reveals a clear focus towards interpreting the trajectory of civilisational progress keeping humans at the centre. Therefore, the term posthuman naturally gravitates towards reimagining a world that shifts its primal lens of focus from the anthropocentric to non-human elements.

What comes after humanism or the 'post', as a temporal prefix attached to humanism, performs a dissolution of this human-centric way of looking at the world. (Arka Chattopadhyay 1)

The twenty-first century actively shifts gears to look at decentralising humans by projecting the wider world of nature. In literature posthuman has been delved into yet the projected possibility is aimed towards an embodiment of human action, materiality and culture. In the nineteenth century posthuman was a fictitious reality

in the human mind touching the vast possibility of scientific research and a desire to control and manipulate the natural order of life. Yet life beyond the biological process can be achieved as has been observed in scientific manipulation of plant life, creating and generating hybrid forms for a possibly better or a more strengthened form to battle mass production and changing climactic conditions. One of the earliest texts in literature which would in the twenty-first century qualify as a science fiction, speculative fiction or for that matter even a posthuman novella brings out an important examination on the necessity to look beyond the human condition. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* stands as a stalwart in literary history evoking introspection into man's desire to overreach in the dark alleys beyond human perceptible control. In my paper I aim to look at the novella *Frankenstein* by contextualising it as a landmark piece of literature which attempts to relook and probably come up with answers that can lay heavy on man's attempts at controlling nature. The later Romantic obsession with the Gothic set the stage and platform to explore the hidden corners of the human mind and to meditate upon and expand the boundaries of human and non-human possibilities.

### Gothic Fiction

Gothic in the nineteenth century defined its boundaries by articulating through set images of terror that were to greatly influence later literary history. Among the Romantic poets William Blake and Samuel Taylor Coleridge continued with their engagement with the Gothic as Blake continued to return to graveyard images, to disappointment and melancholy in his poems. As David Punter mentions,

Blake builds, with the help of Gothic tools, a universe of man/machine chimeras, of dehumanised men and women and of machines with a curious and malevolent mode of life. In this universe all is threat and violence, and the comfortably traditionalist features of the Gothic are pressed into the service of an all-embracing vision of the horror of the fallen world. (Punter 269)

Coleridge's use of the gothic appears to be more conventional and in *Biographia Literaria* he mentions: ... that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. (Enright and Chickera 190-191)

It is with this faith that Coleridge wrote "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "The Dark Ladie" and the "Christabel". In his poem "Religious Musings" Coleridge bespeaks the subject of war and sexual exploitation through Gothic language-image. He also applies the Gothic in the popular poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" thereby generating an atmosphere of uncertainty as he investigates the depths of human psychological trauma and fear. Similar to Blake the intention here is not to project with a motive of mere sensationalism, but a use instead of Gothic exaggeration as a means to convey the underlying horrors of everyday life. A kind of intervention of larger forces within the purview of human life to disrupt a self-realisation between man and his inner conscious. For Blake the Gothic represents the fears that society carries within its folds whereas Coleridge is more involved with finding correlatives that deal with his personal psychological predicaments. The tone of alienation that we find in Coleridge's poems expresses this very personal ghosts that reflect his own sense of guilt and nightmares that he carried all along. The figure of the poet therefore does not remain distant from his creations oftentimes reflecting his personal inhibitions and anxieties.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, the later Romantic poet, is greatly influenced by the German Gothic romances and in his *Queen Mab* (1813), *The Cenci* and *The Revolt of Islam* he evinces the outlaw as justifiable as he necessarily responds to a society that is crucially unjustified. The Gothic for Shelley is alongside also a point of intervention in history as the cathedral and castle ruins both remind us of the days of 'faith and slavery' and voice a necessary to transcend these forms of domination. *The Revolt of Islam* for instance reminds us of the horrors of famine and war that had brought society down to its heels. The Gothic carries within itself the 'dreadful pleasure' of Ann Radcliffe and 'the tempestuous loveliness of terror' and the hero figures of Shelley's narrative poems convey the laudable hero figures that lie in the edge of good and evil. This contradictory quality in expression is both more human and difficult to adjust in a society that is already in a state of flaw. This unification of the beautiful, terrifying and outlawed hero is present in Byron's *Childe Harold* as he speaks mockingly of the 'horrid crags, by toppling convent crowned' in his description of the Newstead Abbey. The representation of the Gothic is intimately linked with architecture, with society and the rebel. Like Shelley, Byron too links the Gothic with religious and political regression and dominance. Shelley's expression of grandeur in "Ozymandias" reflect as means to see the unimaginable depths of history and the distant unconscious:

The Gothic is a distorting lens, a magnifying lens; but the shapes which we see through it have nonetheless a reality which cannot be apprehended in any other way. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Gothic seems to have been in part a limited but genuine substitute for the sciences of history and of psychology, a way of gaining access to, and understanding of, those barbaric areas where knowledge had not quite penetrated. [Punter 271]

### The Wanderer

The figure of the Wanderer emerges in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” as one who is abandoned by God due to an unforgivable crime and is doomed to wander the world as evidence of divine vengeance. The romantic wandering figure is a symbolic one, he is in defiance of God and expresses forbidden human aspiration. He represents a Promethean ambition of defiance and has committed a primal crime often in ignorance. The wandering figure is unable to communicate with society and is a living symbol of the terror at the heart of the world. Yet he is beyond terror as he has defied God and is himself a symbol of taboo. He represents a primitive anomaly of disobedience and carries within himself the disturbance of the natural order that was standardised in the eighteenth century. The vampire which appears to be another favourite of the nineteenth century writer also transgresses the law of mortality. Poets like Coleridge in “Christabel” and Keats in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” sucks out the life and blood from not only the hero of the poem but all its surrounding too. The vampire is itself symbolically a wanderer, an outsider to the normative society and by virtue of what it does it continues to represent the insecurities that threaten society. The Wanderer (usually a male figure) however, despite his rather obscure position is represented as a pursuer and seeker of knowledge that would not align with the tracts of knowledge formation. In romantic parlance he would be similar with that of the alchemists or those who seek the knowledge of eternal life infringing upon boundaries created by God for man. The transgression of these boundaries endows man with a power that positions him closer to God. The seeker and the Wanderer possess an insatiable desire that would result in social disaster and bring calamity upon mankind due to the invasion of the boundary between the human and the divine.

### Frankenstein: The Posthuman Seeker

In 1818 *Frankenstein* transformed the figure of the seeker after forbidden knowledge into a terror-symbol. Victor Frankenstein's endeavour is purely scientific as he looks into the pages of unorthodox forbidden texts of the ancient past to pursue his interests. He does not express any moral or social concerns but considers himself as a ‘pure enquirer after truth’. His experiment is grounded on Faustian alchemy and the processes of actual science. In his pursuit of scientific fulfilment Frankenstein must go to charnel houses and morgues and forfeits all ties of human affection and family as he remains into a state of trance-like obsessiveness of pursuit. Mary Shelley perhaps expresses her own disapproval at the consequences that lead to the birth of the monster/creature, i.e., “an unnatural birth can only have unnatural consequences”. And yet this disapproval dawns upon Frankenstein too:

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? [Shelley 51]

Surprising as well as disturbing it is at Frankenstein's own fixed judgement at his creation and instead of feeling a quasi -paternal affection for his creation he abhors it and abandons his ‘child’ instantaneously. Mary Shelley does not equate appearances with nature and projects the creature as possessing an inherent goodness emerging from innocence and his mind being in a state of *tabula rasa*. The corrupting nature comes from his constant vilification from society. Mary Shelley intended to demonstrate the wrongness of Frankenstein's efforts and at the same time wanted to show the monster as morally neutral who is made evil due to circumstances. The figure of the monster represents the state of the posthuman, as the condition of posthumanism is “a state following humanism,” challenging basic questions of human nature and of the human body. The multi-spaced posthumanism that the creature in *Frankenstein* endorses and posits multiple queries on the very nature of being. The creature appears as a complex entity both physically as well as psychologically, early in the novel we realise that the creature is made out multiple body parts which Victor Frankenstein has collected from graveyards and morgues and is fundamentally a hybrid individual who is also a human-animal. Moreover, when the creature who is faced with rejection and humiliation on multiple accounts devises a means for its own survival by suggesting that Frankenstein once again create another creature like him, this time a female so that his partnership and companionship within social spaces is fulfilled. This brings us to the likely possibility of a diverse alien species that will replace *homo sapiens* on earth. This phobia of an unnatural earth order provokes a fear primarily of replacement. And Victor Frankenstein confronts this in the second attempt and pursuit of unnatural creation as he forfeits and sacrifices his life and closest kin to “rescue” mankind from the calamity of catastrophe. Victor is a symbol of the human seeker and wanderer, one who transgresses boundaries of desire and pursuit of knowledge.

Authentication of humans being transported towards a new posthuman state is has been rigorously discoursed among academic circles and Mary Shelley's iconic novella makes us walk the path only to cringe with a sense of horror at the possibilities. Haraway speaks of this “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction” (Haraway 2) in the context of cyborgs brings out these precise complexities. To evoke a posthumanist subjectivity one needs to recall Donna Haraway who in 1985 conceptualises a “cyborg”, “mythical figure from science fiction... that is perversely resistant to socio-political norms”. (Arka Chattopadhyay 15)

The cyborg is imagined as a disruptive figure that militates against the palpability of a unidimensional, perfect communication. It creates noise and ambiguity. In its transgressive agency, the cyborg shows us 'how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos'. (Arka Chattopadhyay 15)

Haraway's cyborg emerges as a critique of the human condition forecasting that man cannot be measure of all things. The cyborg is integrated in the Teen Titans a TV series for children and young adults where human looking characters are mutated beings. In the twenty-first century posthuman exists without a hyphen, without a pause bringing society closer to uncanny possibilities. What a novel like *Frankenstein* does is to explore the human mind that progresses to create beyond the human scope and address questions of possibility and look at alternative generative agencies beyond humans. The ethical questions that are being asked and attempted to answer, questions related to capitalism, to bio-genetic technologies and most importantly human rationality. Between the boundaries of AI generated knowledge systems and the displacement of humans within the cosmos of social existence the entire graph of man versus scientific advancements, social moral responsibilities and the precarious status of humans become the centre of discussion. *Frankenstein* as a quasi-scientific dystopian fiction forces us as readers and as actual stakeholders to face the possibilities and the consequences providing a word of caution whether due to over achieving desires or due to a natural growth and progression that societies register.

## II. Conclusion

Society as a space that allows the emergence of the aberrant, the outlaw, the non-conformist. Do the seeds of a posthuman condition emerge from these elements that already exist in society? The situation perhaps complicates itself further with the emergence of a hybrid posthuman creature like we see in *Frankenstein* which provokes moral and social concerns with a possibility of take over. Shelley's creature to begin with is humane on all accounts but the reversal that takes place due to human intervention, abhorrence and non-acceptance of diversity within social spaces converts the creature into a killing machine and allows authentication of its annihilation and elimination. The poet and author by creating such characters of rebellion and also endowing them with a unique quality of inherent goodness expresses a lacuna that human society cannot fulfil or justify. Important questions of a more moral type are provoked in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* which unfortunately does not allow for simple uncomplicated answers. Though the creature himself is marginalised and suffers his doomed and terrible fate in the text yet more questions arise that conflicts human interventions.

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