Postcolonialism in the Modern Prometheus

by Abby Smolnicky

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or *The Modern Prometheus*, has long been read as a cautionary tale of scientific hubris, enlightenment rationality, and romantic resistance to materialist visions of life. However, after following Victor Frankenstein and the Creature's evolution, the story extends far beyond the limits of science alone. The emergence, education, and social exclusion of the Creature alongside Victor's obsessive attempts to control the meaning of life explore the fundamental principles that the anthropological theory Postcolonialism would later establish.

The idea of Postcolonial theory began with the publishing of Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*, where he argues that Western portrayals of the East are founded entirely on a system of power intended to justify European imperialism on Other cultures.[1] The Other, as defined by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and used by scholars, is the binary label for any non-European, colonized individuals or cultures used to justify the dominance of their invaders.[2] These binaries eagerly align with Postcolonial theory, as the entire framework analyzes the impact colonialism had on the colonized culture, focusing specifically on how such power dynamics, identity, and representation have changed colonized culture. Said was not alone in leading Postcolonial theory, as the previous works of Claude Levi-Strauss, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and Franz Boas shared key details that expanded the theory, leading it to a postmodern era.

In *Frankenstein's* case, Shelley explores repeated encounters between the self and the Other through Victor and his Creature that closely resemble postcolonial ethnographic processes. Modern critics such as those publishing in *Anthropoetics*, have shown that the Creature's search

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[1]Edward W Said, *Orientalism (*Panthenon Books, 1978), p.3-5, https://monoskop.org/images/4/4e/Said_Edward_Orientalism_1979.pdf.

[2] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit,* trans. by Terry Pinkhard (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 108-109, available at https://files.libcom.org/files/Georg%20Wilhelm%20Friedrich%20Hegel%20-%20The%20Phenomenology%20of%20Spirit%20(Terry%20Pinkard%20Translation).pdf

for belonging and Victor's refusal to acknowledge him replicate the ethical and social tensions that have defined real human communities. Victor behaves exactly like an imperial figure, inventing and rejecting his savage "Other" in order to preserve his own authority. These insights parallel Michel-Rolph Trouillot's argument that Western civilization has historically understood itself through the invention of the so-called "savage" and the subsequent judgement and alienation of them. R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms's analysis of Claude Levi-Strauss and his belief in binaries aligns with Victor's view of life and death, and how he means to control it, as well as in how the doctor labels the line between himself and his monster. Franz Boas, a foundational thinker of anthropology, shares similar views on Postcolonialism where his theory of cultural relativism highlights the Creature's side of the Other: being exposed, judged, and colonized because of the rejection of the Self, and how he creates his own lived experience. Together, these thinkers reveal how *Frankenstein* is not a simple romance, but rather, a narrative that anticipates the central concerns of Postcolonial theory. When Victor creates the Creature, he withdraws from him in horror and then attempts to define humanity by excluding him. Victor subconsciously participates in the same cultural processes that anthropologists have identified in colonized societies. The Creature, in contrast, learns language, customs, and social values by observing the world around him, and his development mirrors the ethnographic work of understanding culture through lived experience. In depicting Victor as a chemistry-based scientist who engages in the same acts of othering, mediation, and cultural interpretation as a colonizer, Shelley shows that the *Modern Prometheus* embodies a civilizational impulse to understand humanity by creating, observing, and rejecting different cultures as seen in postcolonial theory.

In the novel, Victor's creation and subsequent rejection of the Creature embodies the relationship of Othering that is central to the maintenance of power and identity in imperial societies. Shelley presents Victor as a figure who defines his actions by drawing rigid boundaries between himself and the being he has created, stating "I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then, but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived."[3] He categorizes the creature by his few behaviors as imperfect and uncivilized. In projecting onto his creation all that he fears, despises,

[3] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones, 1818), 58, available at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/84/84-h/84-h.htm.

and cannot reconcile within himself, Victor transforms him into a symbolic embodiment of monstrosity and primitiveness. This is the moment where Trouillot's concept of the "savage slot" illuminates the maker and monster dynamic, asserting that the West constructs the Other as a mirror through which it both fantasizes and measures itself. He writes: "What has not been emphasized enough is that this Other was a Janus, of whom the savage was only the second face. The first face was the West itself, but the West fancifully constructed as a utopian projection and meant to be, in that imaginary correspondence, the condition of existence of the savage."[4] Victor's hopes, projections, and subsequent horror at his creation when met with "failure" mirrors Trouillot's multi-faceted Othering process. The scientist projects Western ideals about perfection in not only the human body, but mind, onto the Creature, who is forced into becoming the "savage" in this narrative. This directly mirrors how colonizers define themselves through the marginalization of Others, proving that the act of Othering is not merely an interpersonal or moral failure but a structural, socially legible method of asserting authority. Victor has invented an Other in his own image, imposing hierarchies of worth and refusing to acknowledge the Creature's true agency and desires. The Creature, like colonized subjects in anthropological studies, is rendered simultaneously visible and illegible, present yet denied recognition, forced into a position of dependency and marginalization. Victor's ethical failure is inseparable from his epistemological one as he refuses to understand or interpret the Creature accurately because he does not want to recognize him as a sentient, morally complex being. As literary figures, both characters dramatize the act of a dominant figure inventing and imposing a false identity onto the marginalized Other. Thus, the text shows that the process of Othering is always relational, socially structured, and laden with ethical consequences.

While Victor embodies the Western act of Othering, the Creature fulfills the role as a mediator between binary boundaries of the human and inhuman, colonizer and the colonized. From the moment of his creation, the Creature demonstrates an innate will to not only survive, but to understand and explicitly participate in the social world. Andrew Bartlett from *Anthropoetics* notes "The Monster does not want simply to stay alive, to survive as an animal, to feed and clothe and shelter himself. He hungers for the transcendental effect of sociality, which

[4] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness" in *Anthropological Theory, An Introductory History*, ed. R. Jon McGee and Richard L. Warms, 8th ed. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 515.

itself can never be 'consumed' but only experienced as an effect of the mimetic interactivity of economic exchange."[5] As the Creature "grows up" and seeks mental maturity, he actively engages in the same kinds of observation, learning, and social interpretation found in Postcolonial theory when examining how marginalized subjects navigate and resist imposed hierarchies. The Creature's desire to participate in human exchange mirrors the adaptive strategies of colonized or subaltern figures, who must interpret and negotiate the social, economic, and cultural systems established by dominant powers in order to assert agency and claim recognition. Claude Levi-Strauss's Theory of Binaries furthers the postcolonial connections, as thinking in binaries furthers the human mind's search for intermediaries that transcend and reconcile these opposites. Sherry Ortner explains: "Although Lévi-Strauss proposed that human thinking always parsed the world into binary oppositions, he also believed that the mind was dissatisfied with such oppositions and always searched for a mediator for them. This mediator was a category that was not subsumed by either part of the binary but somehow transcended them."[6] In the context of *Frankenstein*, the Creature embodies this problematic mediator, operating in the space between human and nonhuman. He reaps the experience of assimilation in human culture while remaining rejected outside of it. Like an anthropologist seeking to identify these limitations, the Creature observes language, social norms, and moral codes similar to participant observation through the De Lacey family.[7] Shelley shows that the Creature's knowledge of humanity arises not from isolation or innate rationality (as Victor attempts to claim for himself), but from engagement, empathy, and mimicry, all processes of postcolonial engagement with participant observation. As scholars Younes Poorghorban and Ali Taghizadeh write in "The Monstrosity of Knowledge":

> The monster, despite being of a different species, shares a connection with humane feelings about nature, rejecting man's rationality. However, the monster's inability to fit into the rational understanding of man leads to his rejection by society. Consequently, the

[5] Andrew Bartlett, "Keeping the Monster at a Distance: Artificial Humanity and Victimary Otherness (Frankenstein and the Problem of Modern Science Part 3 of 3)," *Anthropoetics* (Fall/Winter 2007/2008): para. 14, available at https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1303/1303bartlett/.

[6] Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in *Anthropological Theory*, ed. McGee and Warms, p. 357.

[7] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein,* 115.

monster seeks refuge in nature, emphasizing Shelley's Romantic view that accommodates both man and the monster.[8]

After entering the human social world through its fieldwork and learning that he lies outside of it as this Other, the Creature demonstrates the anthropological labor of understanding social systems through careful observation. By existing in this liminal space, the Creature exposes the artificiality of the binaries that Victor relies upon, just as Postcolonial theory interrogates the constructed boundaries between colonizer and colonized.

While Victor's approach to knowledge embodies the rigid binaries of the West, the Creature demonstrates a fundamental understanding of human society aligning with Franz Boas's cultural flux and relativity. As Bartlett writes in "Frankenstein and Scientific Revelation," "When Frankenstein isolates himself and builds the monster in his self-torturing madness, he is concentrating exclusively on the 'object alone' and paradoxically forgetting the human mediation on the scene without which his 'object' cannot have or create value."[9] By attempting to extract knowledge from an abstracted, decontextualized object, Victor mirrors western Enlightenment scientific thinking that ultimately fails him. The Creature becomes a being that exceeds Victor's control because Victor's method ignores the relational and cultural dimensions necessary to truly understand the life he seeks to master. Similarly, Postcolonial theory critiques the colonial and imperial impulse to categorize, classify, and dominate without accounting for context, agency, or lived experience, highlighting the dangers of marginalizing colonized cultures in isolation from their social and cultural realities. Victor's rigid rationalism exemplifies a failure to recognize the complexity and humanity of his creation, replicating the epistemic violence inherent in colonial thought. In contrast, the Creature's understanding of society develops through observation, engagement, and adaptation, reflecting Boas's argument that cultures are not static but exist in constant flux.[10] The Creature does not impose fixed categories on the human world but rather learns its codes, customs, and values in order to negotiate inclusion and assert identity from within a society that rejects him. This adaptability in learning social and moral norms embodies

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[8] Younes Poorghorban and Ali Taghizadeh, "The Monstrosity of Knowledge: Mary Shelley's Symbolic Encounter with The Enlightenment and Industrialization in Frankenstein," *Anglo Saxonica*, 14 August 2024, p. 10, available at https://revista-anglo-saxonica.org/articles/10.5334/as.144.

[9] Andrew Bartlett, "Frankenstein and Scientific Revelation Frankenstein and the Problem of Modern Science (Part 2 of 3)," *Anthropoetics* (Spring/Summer 2007), para 12, available at https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1301/1301frank2/.

[10] Franz Boas, "The Methods of Ethnology," in *Anthropological Theory*, ed. McGee and Warms, p. 145.

the anthropological approach that Boas championed, one that resists absolutist or essentialist definitions and recognizes that both individuals and societies are in continuous transformation. By dramatizing the Creature's learning, Shelley indirectly equates his culture and world to colonized subjects that must navigate and reinterpret imposed systems to survive. The contrast between Victor and the Creature highlights a broader ethical and epistemological principle where civilization's understanding of humanity requires attention to mediation, relationality, and flux rather than isolated rationalism. Shelley's narrative thus dramatizes the ways in which Postcolonial theory emerges from the limitations of rigid rationalist models. The novel shows that ethical, cultural, and epistemological insight arises not from domination or abstraction, but from participation, observation, and relational understanding. The Creature is marked as the embodiment of a more humane, adaptive, and theoretically prescient mode of interpreting human societies.

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley creates a narrative rendition of how civilizations attempt to understand themselves and the Other in their respective worldviews. Victor's relentless rejection of the Creature mirrors the Western construction of the "savage slot" described by Trouillot and embodies the mediatory processes outlined by Lévi-Strauss. The Creature negotiates the space between human and nonhuman, demonstrating the relational, interpretive effort necessary to participate in society. The Creature's adaptive approach to learning reflects Franz Boas's insight into cultural flux, highlighting the failure of Victor's rigid materialistic rationality and illustrating how ethical understanding emerges from engagement and observation rather than abstract mastery. By analyzing *Frankenstein* through a postcolonial lens, it becomes apparent how literature can explore the ethical, cultural, and social mechanisms that control imperial authority in a way other than ethnographic fieldwork.

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