

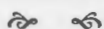
Identity Theft: The Impact of White Literature in Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Written by Stephanie C. Merryfield

Edited by Eric Nichols

Abstract:

Mary Shelley's decision to use the extended metaphor of an unnamed creature as the antagonist in her gothic novel, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, was arguably her attempt to shed light on the greatest debate of her time—the institution of slavery. Undoubtedly this prodigy, the daughter of two of the most influential writers of their day, also took the liberty of demonstrating the power of literature on the minds of the masses. In a scene, she strategically places a portmanteau that holds books of the literary canon inside. The monster, while in the wilderness, finds the books. He, in his pristine, infantile state devours the literature of the European. He determines that they, Europeans, are superior. Upon his encounter with the De Lacey's he is beaten by Felix, the man of the house, and fails to defend himself despite his own physical enormity. What precipitates his inaction? Psychiatrist Frantz Fanon offers, through his theories, a means of understanding the impact that literature has upon the marginalized.



In Mary Shelley's gothic novel, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, the antagonist, a supposed "monster," is unleashed on civilization (Shelley 117). His genesis is occasioned by an insatiate ambition for social recognition by Dr. Frankenstein. Yet, when his father-creator abandons him, and thus denies him a name, an identity, and entrance into society, he passes his time happily learning of European culture. A scene with the De Lacey's, a family that epitomizes the virtues of Eurocentric civility, is altogether disturbing as we see Felix savagely accost the unwanted "devil" as he, on his knees, pleads for acceptance and human charity (117, 121). This brief show of unbridled force and the correlating docility and servile posture raise several interpretive questions: Why does the "monster" shrink back rather than defending himself? What informs Felix's brutality? What curtails the monster's self-assertion before his assailant? His inaction emulates those of the captive slave masses subsisting in Europe and the Americas. Thus, Mary Shelley argues that literature creates a collective psyche. The aegis of my argument is historical and psychological criticism.

To date, most of the discourse engaging Shelley's work has orbited the namelessness and inherent ambiguity of the monster's identity. The result is a corpus of literary criticisms posited in Marxian, Feminist, and Gender Studies scholarship which all utilize the novel as a means of exploring the tenets and theories central to those schools of thought. It is likely, however, that the surroundings and political climate of the day, including a socially liberal father in tandem with a swell in anti-slavery sentiment, did much to influence Shelley's writing. This influential effect was not only rhetorical, but also lends to the emotiveness and pathos associated with the monster. In his book, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth Century Britain*, H. L. Malchow writes of the period, "It may be valuable to bear in mind that the black Jacobins

in Haiti and the parliamentary struggle in England to abolish the slave trade guaranteed that issues of race played a significant contemporary role in the larger political debate surrounding the capacities and rights of mankind" (Malchow 11). Undoubtedly, "parliamentary struggle" suggests that Shelley, too, was privy to both discussions at home and frequent debates in the newspapers that poured over the institution of slavery. Moreover, while the British abolished the slave trade in 1807, the enslavement of Africans continued unabated until 1833 and Shelley's publication date, 1818, is situated within this period. Additionally, in January, 1850, art ostensibly imitated life. An illustration promoting a performance appearing in the *London News* depicts Paul Bedford, tall and swarthy, as the "Monster" aside Edward Wright as Frankenstein in *The Model Man* (Malchow). This advertisement, then, shows that others approximated a monster of African ancestry. It is common knowledge that the majority of Africans dwelling in London at the time were former slaves or their descendants, which strengthens the argument of a conceptualized African monster. These historical accounts indicate the plausibility of the first part of my argument; Shelley's monster is an enthymeme for the African diasporic slave. By necessity, we must assess the issues of despondency, dependency, and self-deprecation, all couched in psychology.

Black Skin White Masks, written by psychiatrist and theorist Frantz Fanon, explores the "man of color's view of the world" which, he concludes, is indelibly fashioned by white culture and the literature it produces ("Negro" 462). Fanon explains that literature serves as a means of "collective catharsis," or a way to release strongly felt emotions (464). He writes,

This is the purpose of games in children's institutions, ... and, in a more general way, of illustrated magazines for children. ... The Tarzan stories, ... serve actually as a release for collective aggression. The magazines are put together by white men for little white men. ... In the magazines, the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, and adventurer, a missionary "who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes" (*Black Skin* 146).

This theory explains that literature, in this case magazines, embeds in the mind of both whites and non-whites alike a loathing for "Negroes or Indians" by operating under over-arching binaries. Those binaries of "white/black," "ruler/ruled" and "master/slave" leave both the white child and the black child vying for the role of the white explorer, adventurer or missionary. Thus, self-actualization for both is undermined. It imparts the belief by the white child that he is born to rule and to the black child that he is born to be subservient to whites. Further, it suggests that the pervasiveness of this type of literature, in the form of "illustrated magazines," is created for the purpose of

perpetuating fears of blacks as they are always assumed as “savage.” Frantz Fanon further notes, “[t]he white family is the agent of a certain system. The society is indeed the sum of all the families in it. The family is an institution that prefigures a broader institution” (Fanon 465).

Evaluating the text of *Frankenstein*, there exists a recurring theme of infantile filial dependence upon the Europeans by the monster, which suggests the malleability of his intellect and emotions. He says, “It impressed me deeply. I learned, from the views of social life which it developed, to admire their virtues ...” (Shelley 114). Yet, he has never met the De Lacey. Rather, the monster, from his hovel, secretly watches the De Lacey’s lives. He develops a delusional relationship with them; one wherein he imagines that they are his “beloved cottagers” and his “protectors” (114-115). The De Lacey family, we see, is the standard from which he learns values. “One night, ... I found on the ground a leathern portmanteau, containing ... ‘Paradise Lost,’ a volume of ‘Plutarch’s Lives,’ and the ‘Sorrows of Werter.’” He continues:

I can hardly describe to you the effect of these books. ... The gentle and domestic manners it described, combined with lofty sentiments and feelings ... accorded well with my experience among my protectors. But I thought Werter himself a more divine being that I had ever beheld or imagined ... I did not pretend to enter into the merits of the case, yet I inclined toward the opinions of the hero ... (Shelley 115).

This celebration of literature produced by the dominant culture served to reaffirm their divine, desirable, and superior position and, conversely, his own devilish, unwanted, and inferior state. This reification of his idealized image of European culture is affirmed by his words “inclined toward the hero.” This is parallel to Fanon’s theory. Moreover, the works he cites are among the most esteemed in the literary canon. They serve as archetypal examples of literature. As such, the monster perceives that there are essential standards of “domestic manners” among his “protectors.” We see, however, that his beliefs are unfounded when he ventures to meet the De Lacey; he is met with brutality.

“Felix darted forward, and with supernatural force tore me from his father, to whose knees I clung ... and struck me violently with a stick. I could have torn him limb from limb ... But my heart sunk within me as with bitter sickness, and I refrained” (121). I initially stated as part of my premise that Whiteness calls its beneficiaries to vehemently beat into subjection those who pose a threat. Felix has conformed to this requirement. We see in this scene that the monster, having been stripped of all identity, culture, and companionship has relinquished his claim to humanity. He, despite his enormity, flees having never asserted himself or making the argument for his self-worth. His value pales in comparison to the De Lacey’s. Felix has unmercifully beaten an innocent to maintain his position. He never inquired of the monster, “Who are you?” or “What do you want?” Rather, he saw a threat and fittingly proceeded to accost the monster.

What we can surmise, then, is that the extended metaphor of an unnamed creature, subject to affliction and desirous of both liberty and companionship, creates a strong allusion to the plight of African bondsmen. More plainly stated, historiography reveals that slaves, like the monster, were stripped of their indigenous names, languages, and culture; unconscionably beaten; constrained in their ability to move about freely; and forbidden to marry or maintain the semblance of a family. All of these atrocities forged a nearly complete collective psyche: a collective psyche which works at once to privilege some while debasing others.

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