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### Frankenstein and Post-Colonialism

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* reveals several realities about the ideological and psychological operations of "othering". Because this literary work was written in 1818, an era of prevalent colonialism under the British Empire, it is important to recognize the existing portrayals of the "Other" within the novel. *Frankenstein* is a product of its time, and puts forward the white, rightful "self" versus the monstrous, demoralized "Other" through several of its characters.

Images of class and race are often intertwined in colonial literature; the descriptions are similar and focus on the same aspects, normally appearance and behavior. For example, peasants in *Frankenstein* are described as "dark-eyed, hardy little vagrants" (Shelley 28), while the blond-haired child of a Milanese nobleman is "of a distinct species, a being heaven-sent" (Shelley 28). A superficial interpretation might be to read this as merely racist; however, taking the time period into consideration, we can conclude that this is specifically "full-blown pseudo-scientific racism" (Curtin 29). As will be detailed later on, science plays a significant role in justifying the subordination of 'inferior' races, and socially secluding the monster in Shelley's novel. It is ultimately Victor Frankenstein's fascination with chemistry and physics that both creates and destroys his monster. Victor Frankenstein's delight at 'discovering' his ability to "renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (Shelley 54) is another

trait that is characteristic of colonizers; this can be compared to Christian missionaries' attempts to 'save African savages' from their native way of life.

The monster's desire to have a companion of his own, one that is like him, is a sign of the colonial subject developing what Fanon referred to as "national consciousness". In the native's fight against abuse emerges a claim to nationhood (Fanon), a desire to engage in the same basic stages of life that he sees the colonizer engaging in and depriving him of. The monster is the lowest of the low; even the foreign peasant Safie's family who he watches and studies for years beat him and chase him away. He is first filled with hopes that are dashed upon being told by the blind man, "the hearts of men are full of brotherly love and charity" (Shelley 159), but he learns within moments that this brotherly love is reserved to those of their own kind, as the colonizer only sympathizes with and defends his fellow colonizers.

Upon teaching himself how to read, he grows conscious of the differences between himself and the persons he read about; colonial subjects often do not find their own voices reflected in literature. He "found [himself] similar yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read" (Shelley 152), even though his choice of books was universal secular history rather than Eurocentric Christian history. The fact that he is able to rationally make this conclusion suggests that despite the abuses of the colonizer, the colonizer had in fact created him in a way that later unintentionally empowered him. "In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature" (Shelley 269); Victor is conscious of this, but feels a sense of duty towards his own species, and this determines his refusal to create a mate for his 'son'. Like the colonizer, Frankenstein denies him this right because he fears that allowing the monster to procreate will lead to "the [creation of] a race of devils" (Spivak). In a Freudian sense, such language of racism

leads to a withdrawal of sexual reproduction (Spivak). The monster is the subaltern who attempts to give himself a voice but is silenced by his master, his creator who had the power to give him life and to deny him procreation, his creator who is empowered to tell the tale of his creation but denied his creation agency.

Revisiting the significance of the monster being literate, by colonial definition he has grown more ‘civilized’. The purpose of the European imperial mission, on the surface, was to civilize the brown savages; by teaching them to read and write, by pressuring them into Christianity, by passing laws that force them to abandon elements of their native culture (Cohn 99). Like the monster, the natives find that in spite of learning the skills necessary to qualify as “civilized”, they still do not fit the category well enough to be considered an equal. The creature learns to reason, think, and love as humans do, but cannot be viewed as such because of his appearance. Just as colonial subjects were conditioned to resemble their European colonizers in their education and life principles, so too was Frankenstein’s monster; the fundamental distinction, however, remains reaffirmed: colonizer versus colonized, human – creator – versus creation. The subject’s identity remains an ambiguous one, torn between two painful realities.

The changes the monster undergoes are also reflective of the colonized subject. The original colonial perception of the colonized is that they are savage, It is only after he is exposed to repeated human cruelty and rejection that he develops a thirst for revenge; “Inflamed by pain, I vowed eternal hatred and vengeance for all mankind” (Shelley 169), as opposed to his earlier genuine desire to befriend mankind and to be accepted by them. Instead, he feels a strong desire to impose his existence and identity, realizing that only a creature like himself could truly sympathize with his misery and crisis: “one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. My

companion must be of the same species have the same defects” (Shelley 173). Referring to himself as “deformed and horrible”, a species with “defects” suggests that the colonizer, or the human race, has succeeded in convincing him he is such, though he had craved to be gentle and kind prior to his confrontation with the humans. It is only after being exposed to colonial injustice and oppression that the mindset of the colonized subject is shifted. The monster had initially perceived them as his “protectors” when he speaks of the “love and reverence [he felt] for my protectors (for so I loved, in an innocent, half-painful self-deceit, to call them)” (Shelley 143). Shelley seems to indirectly pay justice to the demoralized “Other” by allowing the reader insight into the ‘before’ and ‘after’ stages, informing us that the viciousness that grips the monster is a reaction to human/colonial abuse rather than an original inherent state of nature.

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