'This Thing of Darkness'
Racial Discourse in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

*Allan Lloyd Smith*  University of East Anglia

Prospero: . . . this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine

*(Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act V)*

Frankenstein’s Creature has been persuasively identified as enmeshed within a variety of contemporaneous discourses, notably feminism or the rights of women, female anxieties in authorship (and Shelley’s own experience of births and deaths), or radical discourse on the Rights of Man following from William Godwin’s *Political Justice*, perceptions of the condition of the working class, figurations of the unvoiced and dispossessed. Ellen Moers reads *Frankenstein* as a birth myth, lodged in the author’s imagination by the fact that she was herself a mother, and containing ‘the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences.’1 As Moers admits, however, Mary Shelley’s Journal puts emphasis not on her maternity but on her reading: her immersion in the ideas about education, society and morality professed by her father, Godwin, and her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft; but also Humphry Davy on chemistry, Erasmus Darwin on biology; and the discussions of Byron, Shelley and Polidori on mesmerism, electricity and galvanism in relation to the riddle of life. She was ‘herself the first to point to her fortuitous immersion in the literary and scientific revolutions of her day as the source of *Frankenstein*.’2 Reading the book as a response to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, as well as to her own motherless condition and guilt over her mother’s death immediately after her own birth Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss it as ‘the fearful tale of a female fall from a lost paradise of art, speech, and autonomy into a hell of sexuality, science, and filthy materiality’ in which both Victor, and his monster, play the part of Eve because ‘for Mary Shelley the part of Eve is all the parts.’3 David Punter sees the novel rather as profoundly concerned with injustice, ‘the society which generated and read Gothic fiction was one which was becoming aware of injustice in a variety of different areas’ at the stage when ‘the bourgeoisie, having to all intents and purposes gained social power, began to try to understand the conditions and history of their own ascent.’4 Kari J.
Winter argues that in *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley ‘attempts to give voice to those people in society who are traditionally removed from the centers of linguistic power, people who are defined as alien, inferior, or monstrous solely because of physical features (such as sex or race) or material conditions (such as poverty). This raises, if obliquely, the question of race inflections in Shelley’s Gothicism that I wish to explore here.

Issues of race and slavery were central to the emergent English culture with which Mary Shelley eagerly engaged. As Paul Gilroy points out, in this culture the moral and political problem of slavery loomed large not least because it was once recognised as *internal* to the structure of western civilisation and appeared as a central political and philosophical concept in the emergent discourse of modern English cultural uniqueness. Notions of the primitive and the civilised which had been integral to pre-modern understanding of ‘ethnic’ difference became fundamental cognitive and aesthetic markers in the processes which generated a constellation of subject positions in which Englishness, Christianity, and other ethnic and racialized attributes would finally give way to the dislocating dazzle of ‘whiteness’.

Mary Shelley’s youth, her education, and the creation and revision of *Frankenstein* coincided with the great wave of British antislavery agitation that resulted in the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, and ultimately emancipation in 1833. Although governmental suppression of popular politics in the 1790s prevented large scale public agitations such as mass meetings and petitionings until 1814, when these re-emerged (again over slavery), it is evident that so significant and pressing an issue, with all its inherent implications for the rights of man, would profoundly register in the consciousness of one with Mary Shelley’s lineage and inclinations. So too, of course, would an awareness of violent slave insurrections, such as the Haitian rebellion of San Domingo in the 1790s. A small but telling pointer to this awareness is the refusal of Mary and Shelley to use sugar because it came from the West Indian plantations.

In fact references to race and slavery echo throughout the novel: ‘if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved’ (37), without unsullied descent and riches a man was considered as ‘a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profit of the chosen few’ (99), ‘mine shall not be the submission of abject slavery’ (123), ‘the whole period during which I was the slave of my creature’ (132), ‘For an instant I dared to shake off my chains . . . but the iron had eaten into my flesh’ (139), ‘a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth’ (144), ‘I was the slave, not the master of an impulse’ (195), ‘the prospect of that day when, enfranchised from my miserable slavery’ (1831: 224). Such frequent references, although usually metaphorical, indicate how far the rhetoric of control and submission permeated Shelley’s literary culture and thus signal the need for a closer attention to the thematics of race and slavery in the text in order to consider how *Frankenstein* can be related to contemporary discourses on race, slavery and anti-slavery.
Monstrousness

Gilbert and Gubar read the novel as inflected by *Paradise Lost*, and the Creature himself as resonant of Eve (and behind her, the figure of Sin). But the hyper-masculinity of the Monster (a creature ‘emphatically male in gender and prowess’ as William Veeder observes),\(^{10}\) suggests a different originary figure, Caliban, the enslaved native of the island in *The Tempest*, a vengeful ‘thing of darkness’ having ‘a certain crude tenderness and heavy grace of expression’,\(^ {11}\) but never to be trusted. ‘I have used thee / Filth as thou art, with human care . . . , till thou didst seek to violate / The honour of my child’, says Prospero.\(^ {12}\) Echoing Prospero’s term the Creature says of himself: ‘my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance’ (109). Certainly not used with any human care by Frankenstein, the Creature arguably has juster cause of resentment of his creator, the magician of science, than Caliban of his master Prospero. Other echoes of *The Tempest* may be relevant. Miranda says to Caliban ‘Abhorred slave / Which any print of goodness wilt not take, / Being capable of all ill!’ . . . (I:354–6), and, ‘Thy vile race / Though thou didst learn, had that in’t which good natures / Could not abide to be with’ (I:359–62). Prospero calls him ‘A devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick . . . (IV:188–9)’, just as Frankenstein says of his Creature: ‘He is eloquent and persuasive . . . but trust him not. His soul is as hellish as his form, full of treachery and fiend-like malice’ (184). Caliban, according to Frank Kermode, represents the natural man. But this figure is not, as in pastoral, a virtuous shepherd but what the ‘Names of the Actors’ describes as ‘a savage and deformed slave’. His name may be a derivative of ‘Carib’, meaning a savage inhabitant of the New World, or it may be an anagram of cannibal. It may have an echo of *cauliban*, a Romany word meaning blackness. His deformity may also be related to reports from the West Indies of ‘curious specimens’ of humanity.\(^ {13}\) Whether or not Caliban is black, he is definitely of mixed origins, being the offspring of a devil, possibly Setebos, and a ‘foul witch’, the ‘hag’ Sycorax.

When the Creature is first animated, Frankenstein describes him thus:

\begin{quote}
His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! – Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips. (38)
\end{quote}

Such features are, as David A. Hedrich Hirsch points out, ‘commonly encountered in colonial depictions of Asian, Indian, and African “savages”’.\(^ {14}\) The description positions the Creature within the relays of racial discourse popularised in the seventeenth century and persistent throughout the eighteenth, whereby the racial other was identified as grotesque and of a lower order. In ‘Hostages to Empire: the Anglo Indian Problem in *Frankenstein, The Curse of Kehama*, and *The Missionary*’, D. S. Neff suggests that Shelley may have been working with models of mon-
strousness and racial otherness derived in some part from the colonial experience of British India. In India interracial sexual partnerships were first approved but later denounced by the East India Company; and the Anglo-Indian offspring of such liaisons were extensively employed but later debarred from officer rank by the Company (1791) and subsequently, as fears regarding their loyalty increased, from all service in the British army (1808).15 Neff is persuasive regarding the Creature’s colonial ‘primal scene’ of self-recognition, in which ‘the dark-skinned individual’s irredeemable otherness is pressed home so completely and forcibly that identification with the dominant race is rendered impossible’ (399).

David Brion Davis notes that ‘despite the ancient belief in the fixed distinctiveness of species, the equally ancient belief in continuity suggested the likelihood of infinite gradations between each form of animal life.’16 The Hottentots were seen in the late seventeenth century as being close to the apes, physically grotesque and displaying brutish customs along with their bestial appearance. Subsequent claims, by Anton Leeuwenhoek for example, held that the blood of negroes was different from that of whites. Mary Shelley’s Journal records that in December 1814 she read Mungo Park’s Travels in Africa, a book that described examples of violence and savagery among African people.17 The eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century emergence of biological science, making it clear that man was part of the animal kingdom and ‘structurally and functionally so like the ape that no sharp distinctions could be made’,18 served to confirm such thinking. Shelley’s monster belongs with such formulations not because he is actually black, being in fact composed of a promiscuous intermixture of Bavarian human and animal body parts,19 but because of his grotesque ugliness, superhuman animal powers, and the animal/human taint of miscegenation involved in his creation; entirely the opposite of a pure line of descent. Shelley chose not to give her scientist the arguably more straightforward route of reanimation of a dead human body: her choice of an assemblage of various human and animal parts introduces the issues attached to cross-racial and even cross-species reproduction and thus engages with the anthropological and biological discourses outlined above:

I was, besides, endowed with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they, and could subsist on coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked around I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned? (99, 100)

Even the Creature’s ability to withstand pain is in keeping with a popular misconception of the period: The Dahomeans, for example ‘assumed a mask of insensitiveness in the face of trials, thinking that self-pity in any form would only invite further troubles. To the European, however, this cultural trait often appeared as evidence of unfeeling animality.’20 Aphra Behn’s story of the noble Oroonoko, stoic even in torture and calmly smoking a pipe during his martyrdom, became a legend of the eighteenth-century stage, and even as late as 1767 it was reported in the
London Magazine that Jamaican slaves ‘smiled contemptuously while being burned alive.’21 But the debate had its other side: Behn's Oroonoko was portrayed as admirable, heroic, and passionate in defence of freedom, and, in the stage version that played nearly every season for a full century, only reluctantly driven into revolt. This tradition continued in the large number of plays and poems that later celebrated Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the Haiti's San Domingo Revolution. The nobility and sensitivity of the Creature makes it apparent which side of this debate Mary Shelley would take; he is so sympathetically presented that despite his atrocious crimes, many readers have shared the view expressed by Kari J. Winter, that although the monster may be borne away by the dark waves, his remaining alive as the novel ends 'leaves us with a faint hope that at some future time he will find a voice and place in the world.'22

The Autodidact

The extraordinary mental capacities of the Creature enable him to learn to speak and to read, merely by his covert observation of the De Lacey family. Denied knowledge by his master he is forced to learn language and literacy in secret just as the West Indian and American slaves, denied access to knowledge because of fears of organised insurrection, were forced to find their covert education as they might, whether by help from a sympathetic mistress, from fellow slaves, or in secret religious assemblies. Like the slaves, too, he has no name of his own. Unknown to the family, the Creature eavesdrops on the language instruction of Safie: 'My days were spent in close attention, that I might more speedily master the language; and I may boast that I improved more rapidly than the Arabian, who understood very little, and conversed in broken accents, whilst I comprehended and could imitate almost every word that was spoken' (98). He also benefits from the Jacobinite book Felix reads to Safie, Volney's Ruins of Empires, which gives him an overview of the history of empires, and a revelatory understanding of humankind:

These wonderful narratives inspired me with strange feelings. Was man indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time as a mere scion of the evil principle, and at another as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike . . . Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. (99)

The realisation of his ‘otherness’ or rather ‘othering’ comes with the acquisition of cultural knowledge in a model of coming-to-consciousness and disproof of assumed innate incapacity that is a regular element of the slave narrative: ‘the correlation of freedom with literacy . . . became the central trope of the slave narratives.’23 His realisation is then painfully confirmed by the revulsion of the De Lacey family when they discover him. Before this moment of catastrophe, the Creature positions himself much as a domestic slave or ‘house-nigger’, admiring but invisible, like Caliban a provider of wood for the household who neither see him nor can afford to recognise him when he risks to ask their assistance. Until that point, the
family has mystified his gifts as those of some helpful spirit, much as slave holders indulged in the mystification that their bound servants were loyally devoted to their own welfare. When the veil finally drops, the Creature seeks revenge, burning the house in insurrectionary fashion: ‘I lighted the dry branch of a tree, and danced with fury around the devoted cottage . . . I waved my brand . . . with a loud scream fired the straw, and heath, and bushes, which I had collected’ (117). Still not yet fully committed to rebellion, the Creature saves a child from drowning, to be rewarded not by gratitude but by a bullet from her parent. Only then does he instigate his regime of terror, killing little William and implicating the innocent Justine in the murder: ‘I too, can create desolation; my enemy is not impregnable; this death will carry despair to him, and a thousand other miseries shall torment and destroy him’ (121). This contrasts strongly with his initial disposition: ‘I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king, if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me’ (80).

The narrative shape of the Creature’s account of himself is akin to that of the slave narrative. It begins with the innocence of early life: ‘a gentle light stole over the heavens and gave me a sensation of pleasure. I started up, and beheld a radiant form rise from among the trees. I gazed with a kind of wonder’ (83). He discovers that ‘a pleasant sound, which often saluted my ears, proceeded from the throats of the little winged creatures who had often intercepted the light from my eyes’ (83), and proceeds, through self-positioning as in effect a plantation house-slave identifying with the family (‘he found his store always replenished by an invisible hand’, [93]), to limited self-recognition: ‘I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers – their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool!’ (93). Self-education leads to an increasing historical and political awareness before ill treatment develops his consciousness of personal wrong and alienation: ‘No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; or if they had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing . . . What was I?’ (100, 101). The Creature’s condition at this point seems to anticipate the insights of later authors of slave narratives such as the American Frederick Douglass:

there are special reasons why I should write my own biography . . . Not only is slavery on trial, but unfortunately, the enslaved people are also on trial. It is alleged, that they are, naturally, inferior; that they are so low in the scale of humanity, and utterly stupid, that they are unconscious of their wrongs, and do not apprehend their rights.

Douglass further points out that: ‘The white children could tell their ages, I could not’ and ‘I do not remember ever to have met a slave who could tell of his birthday.’ Slaves, in Henry Louis Gates’s words, ‘stand outside of the calendar’.

Mary Prince, an early author of a slave autobiography (1831) provides another narrative that can be ‘intertextually’ related to Shelley’s account. In ‘The Two Marys (Prince and Shelley)’, Helena Woodard argues that despite its predated composition, Shelley’s artistic invention can be seen as ‘an ironic reading of Prince’s actual existence as an enslaved black woman’.
In fact, to further pursue the analogy with later theorists of race, the Monster exists in a state of 'double consciousness' like that famously described by W. E. B. Du Bois: 'One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.' Both within and outside the culture of the De Laceys (or of his creator), the Creature necessarily develops a schizophrenic sense of himself. His fall into self-awareness leads to the recognition of a need for politicised self-assertion, revenge, and autonomy, just as the defining moment of the slave narrative is an assertion of the rights of the self against the wrongs of the slave-holding system, followed by the physical search for freedom in the trajectory of flight, running away, pursued by the Master or his agents. The Creature's flight (into the frozen North, prophetic of the nineteenth century experience of American slaves escaping to North America and Canada), fulfils this pattern.

*The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, Written by Himself* was first published in 1789 in London, with an American edition in 1791. An indication of its wide influence is that within five years it went through eight more editions, and was again reprinted in the nineteenth century. Mary Shelley’s Journal makes no mention of it but she could have read this well-known autobiography before 1814, when the Journal entries begin. Kidnapped by slavers from his Ibo home in Nigeria, the child Equiano 'had remarked where the sun rose in the morning, and set in the evening as I travelled along; and I had observed that my father’s house was towards the rising of the sun' (17). His simplicity of mind and observation leads him to expect that he will be eaten, and to believe that the slavers’ ships are worked by magic rather than simply sails and anchor: 'the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked, in order to stop the vessel' (24). Like the Creature he finds great sadness in having no one with whom he is able to converse, is horrified by man’s inhumanity and, poignantly, is betrayed yet again into slavery by his master, after years of service in England and as a British sailor: 'Thus, at the moment I expected all my toils to end, was I plunged, as I supposed, in a new slavery; in comparison of which all my service hitherto had been "perfect freedom;" and whose horrors, always present to my mind, now rushed on it with tenfold aggravation' (60). In other respects, too, some correspondences with *Frankenstein* may be noted: his desire to learn to read and write and to understand navigation, a journey to Turkey (Safie is Turkish), and a richly described expedition to the polar regions when his ship is trapped in the ice. Equiano’s descriptions of slavery atrocities became widely known and were important in the British Antislavery movement. It was a report by him, for example, that led to publicity for the infamous Zong affair, in which 130 manacled slaves had been thrown overboard in order to claim insurance money (Preface, x, xxxvi).

But Equiano’s *Narrative* is also pertinent to Frankenstein in another, perhaps less easily recognised way: it amounts to a life-long meditation on the responsibilities of masters and those who serve them. Equiano refuses, for example, to gain his freedom dishonestly, as he sees it, when he has the opportunity to escape at Guadeloupe (and this even after he has been re-impressed into slavery and sold
again!), insisting instead on saving up his earnings through small trade and eventually buying his freedom. But even when free, he is constantly engaged in a search for suitable masters (and just as often seems to be swindled by them). The eighteenth century world is even imaginatively a culture of masters and servants, and Equiano often reflects that freedom for a black is so perilous as to be hardly worth having, since there is no legal redress for black people in the West Indies or, it would seem, in America, at least in Georgia or at Charles Town. The best that he can hope for is to find a reliable master, and become to him an invaluable servant. Like the Creature, he feels strongly the terms of this compact and is both hurt and outraged when it is so frequently broken.

A curious parallel between *Frankenstein* and the generality of later slave narratives is structural: just as the slave narrative used dominant cultural endorsement as a framing device – usually a preface attesting that the narrative could be relied upon as the original work of its author – so does *Frankenstein* offer the attestation of Frankenstein himself as to the veracity of the Creature’s narrative, and Walton performs as a surrogate for the sceptical but ultimately convinced readership. Such parallels may of course be pushed too far: the embedded narratives of *Frankenstein* doubtless have more to do with the Gothic tradition, well established before 1816, than future publishing imperatives in enabling the acceptance of black authors by a predominantly white audience. Similarly, the Creature’s narrative may be as much explained by reference to Rousseau’s *Confessions* – or even the popular genre of penny confessions by condemned criminals – as by its resonance with the slave narratives that followed shortly after. And yet, if we consider the cultural subtexts of Mary Shelley’s imaginative investigation of what it might mean to be a disenfranchised, unacknowledged and spurned member of the human race, the implication of some racially inflected dimension surely becomes inescapable. In another context Diderot uses a revealing metaphor: The writer ‘carries the torch to the back of the cave . . . He blows upon the glorious phantom who presents himself at the entrance of the cave; and the hideous Moor whom he was masking reveals himself.’

For later American and West Indian slaves, the possession of a voice, and of literacy, was a disproof of Enlightenment assumptions that, as for Hegel, blacks had no history and no true self-consciousness, and lay ‘veiled in a shroud of silence, invisible not because they had no face, but rather because they had no voice . . . the blackness of invisibility is the blackness of this silence.’ The Creature’s assertion of his literacy, and his human sensitivity, is emblematic of the breaking down of such boundary assumptions.

**The Master and the Slave**

The Creature is terrifying, Hirsch asserts, ‘not merely in his physical otherness but more profoundly in his call for recognition as a humane, if not also human, being’ becoming monstrous by ‘undermining determinations of membership within le genre humain that depend on familial status (and, by extension, racial or national membership).’ Frankenstein’s denial of his humanity, repeated by the De Laceys
and the rescued child’s parents, echoes the larger cultural denial of full humanity to African slaves, a convenient and even necessary justification for their bondage and mistreatment. Again, reference to *The Tempest* is illuminating. At the end of the play, Prospero says of Caliban: ‘this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine’ (V:275–6). The initial action of *Frankenstein* is driven by Frankenstein’s determination *not* to acknowledge the Creature as his own; and its conclusion by the obsessive realisation that nevertheless he *must* do so. The intertwining of master and Creature echoes Hegel’s formulation of the entanglement of mastery and slavery wherein the identity of the master is seen as bound to the consciousness of his slave or bondsman. The bondsman has power over the master by refusing him autonomy and forcing him into psychological dependence. Paradoxically, then, the slave has a greater awareness of freedom, whereas the master is only conscious of his need for control and mastery:

The truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the consciousness of the bondsman . . . Just as lordship showed its essential nature to be the reverse of what it wants to be, so, too, bondage will, when completed, pass into the opposite of what it immediately is: being a consciousness repressed within itself, it will enter into itself, and change round into real and true independence.'

Ultimately, the self assertion of the Creature, his coming to consciousness of the power relations between himself and Frankenstein, makes him the more autonomous of the two; and it is he who enables and directs Frankenstein’s pursuit of him, leaving supplies for his master: ‘Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension’, says the Creature, in a reversal of the terms of bondage that shows how the discourse of slavery in the novel is more than metaphorical, ‘You are my creator, but I am your master; – obey!’ (145).

**The Denial of Sexuality**

Like the slave, the Creature is denied control and fulfilment in sexuality. Slave families were routinely broken up, wives and children sold on (marriage or sustained parenting was rarely permitted as domestic relations interfered with the economic flexibility of the institution). The Creature’s entirely reasonable request for a partner like himself is refused by Frankenstein: ‘a race of devils would be propagated on the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror’ (144).

A related theme, the supposed insatiable desire of black men for white women, is also strongly hinted. When the Creature kills the child William, he finds a medallion of Frankenstein’s mother, a

portrait of a most lovely woman. In spite of my malignity it softened and attracted me. For a few moments I gazed with delight on her dark eyes fringed by deep lashes, and her lovely lips; but presently my rage returned: I remembered that I was forever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow; and that she whose resemblance I contemplated would, in regarding me, have changed that air of divine benignity to one expressive of disgust and affright. (121)
When he encounters Justine, he reiterates this: ‘Here, I thought, is one of those whose smiles are bestowed on all but me; she shall not escape . . .’ (122). The Creature does not rape or sexually assault Justine, although Gilbert and Gubar rightly see a ‘sinister rape fantasy’ in the 1831 revision: ‘Awake, fairest, thy lover is near – he who would give his life but to obtain one look of affection from thine eyes’, and, ‘not I, but she shall suffer: the murder I have committed because I am for ever robbed of all that she could give me, she shall atone. The crime had its source in her: let hers be the punishment’ (222).34 The death of Elizabeth, Frankenstein’s bride, similarly arouses echoes of dominant cultural anxieties and rape fantasies about white women and black men:

She was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair. Everywhere I turn I see the same figure – her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier. (172)

At the open window the fiend grins as he jeers and points towards the corpse. Most pertinently, Mary Shelley’s 1831 revisions intensified Elizabeth’s Saxon racial features as the flower of white girlhood, contrasting with the other children (the ‘dark-eyed, hardy little vagrants’) when she is first encountered, no longer as in the first edition simply beautiful and hazel-eyed; she significantly becomes, in the 1831 version

very fair. Her hair was the brightest living gold, and, despite the poverty of her clothing, seemed to set a crown of distinction on her head. Her brow was clear and ample, her blue eyes cloudless, and her lips and the moulding of her face so expressive of sensibility and sweetness, that none could behold her without looking on her as of a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features. (206)

The perfect victim then, in H. L. Malchow’s terms of ‘the construction of both race and a vulnerable femininity’,35 and more than merely, as Elizabeth Bohls describes her, exemplary of the Victorian ‘Angel in the House’.36 Bohls argues that Frankenstein ‘indicts aesthetics as an inherently imperial discourse, structured by principles of hierarchy and exclusion’, and that it ‘binds together a little community, a micro-cosmos of polite British society, marred by its subordination of women and colonisation of non-European peoples’ (34); and there is undeniably a relation between eighteenth-century aesthetics and racist constructions of beauty or ugliness. But H. L. Malchow takes the argument in a more productive direction by showing how Frankenstein is in part a product of racialist politics and contemporary history.

Revenge, Atrocity, and Insurrection

The extreme violence of the Creature’s revenges upon Frankenstein, his selection of innocent child or female victims, his deep malignity in engineering Justine’s wrongful conviction and execution, his attack on the loyal friend of his master, Clerval, presents something of a conundrum in assessing the reader-response posi-
tion that Mary Shelley may seem to imply. The Creature’s mistreatment by the humans, his evident grasp of intellect, his remarkable sensitivity, his ability in all this in effect to become human, all these conflict with his willingness to institute a reign of terror. The excesses of the French Revolution, as a mausoleum of worthy and humane intentions, may inform these choices.

In the terms established in the above set of correspondences, however, it may be that the San Domingo Rebellion after 1791 could also underlie Shelley’s investigation of the limits of readerly sympathy or alienation. The Haitian Revolution in effect extended the principles of the French Revolution, and also held explicit parallels with the American Revolution, with its justification of necessary violence in pursuit of freedom. But as Eric Sundquist says, ‘Haiti came to seem the fearful precursor of black rebellion throughout the New World, becoming an entrenched part of master-class ideology in both Latin-America and the United States.’37 The Revolution of course raised the issue of what level of violence was justifiable and necessary in the pursuit of laudable aims. San Domingo served as model both for abolitionists, who argued that the Haitians had but seized the same rights as the Americans shortly before them, but also for pro-slavery forces, who claimed that it had led to carnage and degeneration, a foretaste of bloody revenge at the hands of the slaves. ‘Like a prism, the trope of San Domingo reflected all conflicting sides of the tangled question of bondage and became a prophetic simulacrum of events feared to lie on the horizon of American slavery.’38 Its initial leader, Toussaint L’Ouverture, was widely acclaimed by abolitionists as a dignified and noble leader of a righteous cause, becoming ‘a key mythic figure in the war on slavery.’39 But such were the horrors and fears unleashed by the conflict that even the well known South American revolutionary, Fransisco Miranda would write in 1798: ‘as much as I desire the liberty and independence of the New World, I fear the anarchy of a revolutionary system. God forbid that these beautiful countries become, as St Domingue, a theatre of blood and crime under the pretext of establishing liberty.’40 Toussaint’s successor, the infamous Jean-Jacques Dessalines, became the model for black terror. Sundquist quotes from Mary Hassal’s Secret History: or, the Horrors of St Domingo (1808), the story of a young white woman who refused one of Dessaline’s men: ‘The monster gave her to his guard, who hung her by the throat on an iron hook in the market place, where the lovely, innocent, unfortunate victim slowly expired.’41

Such were the horrors popularly linked to black insurrection, and inferentially associated with the Monster’s remorseless quest for autonomy and vengeace. Shelley, then, might be seen to be presenting both sides of the issue: sympathetic to the Monster, but also registering shock and horror at his however justifiable excesses. Doubtless she had not read Mary Hassal’s Secret History, but she would have been aware of similar accounts of the events; certainly her Journal records that both she and Percy Shelley read Bryan Edwards’ History of the West Indies (1793) in December 1814,42 a book that discussed differences of race and colour, and the horror of the slave rebellions, and described the ‘Carribees’ of the West Indies as unnaturally cruel and violent, however peaceful and affectionate among themselves:
it serves in some degree to lessen the indignation which a good mind necessarily feels at the abuses of power by the Whites, to observe that the Negroes themselves, when invested with command, give full play to their revengeful passions, and exercise all the wantonness of cruelty without restraint or remorse. He also described a slave rebellion in which ‘they surrounded the overseer’s house about four in the morning, in which eight or ten White people were in bed, every one of whom they butchered in the most savage manner, and literally drank their blood mixed with rum . . . then set fire to the buildings. In one morning they murdered between thirty and forty Whites, not sparing even infants at the breast.’

Henry Dundas, speaking in the House of Commons in 1796, justified the use of bloodhounds in hunting down Negroes in Jamaica, claiming that ‘The Maroons were accustomed to descend from their fastnesses at midnight, and commit the most dreadful ravages and cruelties upon the wives, children, and property of the inhabitants, burning and destroying every place which they attacked, and murdering all who unfortunately became the objects of their fury.’

This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine

Shelley’s novel ends among the dazzling whiteness of the arctic wastes, where, after his futile pursuit, Frankenstein dies and the Creature proposes to immolate himself at the northernmost point. At some level this white-out refers implicitly to the failure and inability of the dominant culture to find a place for the other; it is literally a pyrrhic victory in which the self-delusion of the urge for dominance and control has been exposed. The chastened explorer Walton will abandon his quest for mastery and glory and set sail for domestic tranquillity; but the issues entangled in Shelley’s discourse of master and slave, power and freedom, and the Rights (and obligations) of Man most broadly conceived, reverberate on.

One of the implications of a repositioning of the Creature and his maker within the terms of contemporaneous racial discourse is that what amounts to a critical consensus on the relation between Creature and Creator needs to be reconsidered. Rosemary Jackson puts the prevailing view effectively when she says that

the monster confronts Frankenstein as his own body in pieces . . . What drives the narrative . . . is a strong desire to be unified with this ‘other’ side. The monster is Frankenstein’s lost selves, pieces of himself from which he has been severed, and with which he seeks re-unification, hence his reluctance to kill it. Their relationship is one of love-hatred, and it becomes increasingly exclusive. They have no existence apart from one another.

This reading is generated by the Creature’s own description of himself as ‘a filthy type of yours’ (109), and by Frankenstein’s self-blame for the catastrophes that he has set in motion: ‘my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me’ (57). Moers’ reading of the novel as a birth myth, and Gilbert and Gubar’s sense of the creature as a version of its female author similarly assume the appropriateness of a psychoanalytical interpretation that sees the Creature as an aspect of its creator/s. These versions all point to the idea that the atrocities
committed by the Creature are in some sense the fulfilment of Frankenstein’s deepest wishes. But there is no evidence of such deeper drives in Frankenstein than what has been inferred through the actions of the Monster: in effect, if he does it, and his maker feels responsible and guilty, it is argued that Frankenstein himself must have wished it. In fact, however, Frankenstein’s complex feelings of guilt and responsibility are neither singular nor surprising. Elizabeth too, for example, on learning of the death of William, exclaims ‘Oh God! I have murdered my darling’ (53). Her outcry is explained by her having allowed William to wear the valuable miniature, for which he seems to have been murdered. Frankenstein is responsible for the actions of his Creature, just as a slaveholder would be held responsible for the actions of his slaves, but he need no more be understood as wishing for those actions than a slaveholder would wish for atrocities committed against his family in an uprising. The ‘Other’ is connected to the self here not as part of the self but in a symbiosis of power relations bearing with it responsibility. The Creature’s tortured sense of difference-within-resemblance similarly locates him not in relation to the individual psychology of Frankenstein but to the eighteenth century debates over cross-racial resemblance and difference. And Frankenstein’s sense that he has loosed a vampire of his own spirit into the world is qualified with ‘nearly’ to stress its figurative meaning:

I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind, and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror, such as the deed which he had now done, nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me. (57, italics added)47

In that their vicious practices could and sometimes did generate a cruel revenge by the oppressed, those who maintained racial superiority and subordination of the racial ‘Other’ were responsible for slave atrocities without in any sense wishing for that outcome. Frankenstein’s protestations of anger, remorse, and vengefulness, like the Creature’s, may be read as they are uttered, enmeshed – as so often in the Gothic – within a contemporary web of discourses on rights, justice, responsibilities; and otherness.

Notes

2 Ibid., p. 94.
Racial Discourse in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*


9 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. by Marilyn Butler (text of 1818 with 1831 variants; London: William Pickering, 1993). Parenthesised references in this sentence are taken from this edition. Future references are to this edition and will be given in parentheses in the text. Variants found in the 1831 Edition are prefaced with that date.


12 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act I, ll. 347–50. Further references to the play are given in parentheses in the text. This also resonates with Victor Frankenstein's 'workshop of filthy creation', Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 36.


15 D. S. Neff, 'The Anglo-Indian Problem in *Frankenstein*, *The Curse of Kehama*, and *The Missionary*, *European Romantic Review* (Fall 1997) 8/4, 386–408. Further references to this essay are given in parentheses in the text.


18 Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, p. 455

19 *Frankenstein* describes this use of animal as well as human parts: 'I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay . . . The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials' (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 36).


24 The slave's master, of course, was very often his natural father also.


26 Gates, *Figures In Black*, p. 90

27 Helena Woodard, 'The Two Marys (Prince and Shelley) on the Textual Meeting Ground of Race, Gender, and Genre' in Dolan Hubbard, ed., *Recovered Writers/Recov-


30 Diderot, responding to Richardson’s Clarissa, quoted by Henry Louis Gates, Figures In Black, p. 105.

31 Ibid., p. 104.


34 Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, p. 244.


38 Ibid., p.32.

39 Ibid., p. 34.

40 Ibid., p. 142.

41 Quoted in ibid., p. 145.


44 Quoted in Malchow, ‘Frankenstein’s Monster and Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, p. 108


46 Ibid., p. 99.

47 It is perhaps also possible to read here an echo of West Indian voodoo practices.

Address for Correspondence

Allan Lloyd Smith, School of English and American Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK.