Of Monsters and Men: Revisiting Frankenstein as an Anti-Utopia

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Abstract: Frankenstein has long held the repute of being the world's first science fiction novel and that too by a female author. First published in 1818, it was soon lauded for its gothic setting, its bold vision as well as its clever use of language. The story in itself was a caution against the new and invasive scientific experiments challenging the natural world order as well as served as a warning against the prevalent male hegemony over life, literature, and art. And although it was revised extensively in 1831, in its tenor and vision, the novel has remained as a staunch critique of the utopic ideals of male scientific enterprises, overzealousness for unknown adventures, and the undermining of the feminine power of creation and creativity. My paper is therefore an attempt to revisit the text as an anti-utopia and argue that in its final moments, the feeling of hope or an alternative is purposefully missing from it. To achieve this, I will briefly discuss the history of the word "anti-utopia" and its difference from its more famous counterpart "dystopia." Further, I will cite instances from the text which build up to its annihilative ending and argue that under the given the circumstances it was the most logical solution to the problem at hand and was indicative of Shelley's own shifting beliefs.

Keywords: Utopia, Dystopia, Anti-Utopia, Science Fiction, Romanticism

First published in 1818, then republished in 1823, and finally being extensively revised in 1831, the text of the novel *Frankenstein* has had an equally interesting afterlife as the story of its creation. Presented as a cautionary tale of a man's transgression and the resulting punishment that ensues, the creator of the novel Mary Shelly in collaboration[1] with her husband Percy Shelley has composed a saga of a scientist-creator's humiliating defeat at the hands of his own creation. But in doing so, she has overturned the conventions of gothic satire on its head and in turn given us an enduring cultural icon as evidenced in numerous Disney movies and cartoons. Initially as collaboration and later as an individual effort of Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* is however, not an easy text to deal with. In its form and intended message its deceptively simple plotline has resulted in diametric opposite appropriations of the terms "Frankenstenian monster" or "Frankenstein." Generations after generations, numerous people have consumed and further propagated the overtly simplistic cautionary message as a sort of a broader warning against invasive scientific experiments, new enterprises, popular revolutions, protests, emancipation of slaves, freedom movements, etc. Clearly the text's afterlife has gone beyond the original intention of its author and has become a tool in the hands of both powerful and the privileged to oppress by giving its example, as well as, the oppressed and the vulnerable to topple the status quo by giving the counter-example. Here, both the understandings have emanated from the same text.

Thus, long after its initial popularity, *Frankenstein* continues to force its readers to grapple with their thoughts and feelings in relation to the story as well as their own histories and

timelines. The Faustian trajectory following the fall of the eponymous character Victor Frankenstein and the hinted destruction of his created being (who manages to endear himself to the readers despite his destructive actions) result in feelings of inexplicable grief and sadness which makes the very reading of the novel an unforgettable experience. Not to forget that at the mere age of 19 and after suffering the loss of her first child, the heavily pregnant Mary Shelley managed to finally put together her novel which bore unmistakable impressions from her personal life and tragedies. And as the circumstances changed further after its first publication in 1818, the 1831 version became an altogether new text, bearing newer influences from her life but "without compromising on her critique of the prevalent social conventions" (Rourke 379).

The kernel of the original story which was famously conceived as a result of a ghost-story competition between a small group of friends in the gloomy weather of Geneva of 1816 underwent drastic revisions in the 1831 version and signaled the growth of Mary Shelley as a mature author in her own right. While in the 1818 version Mary Shelley chose anonymity along with a generous preface by her husband, by 1831 (after his death) she wrote her own "Introduction" where she (falsely) assured the readers that the text has largely remained unchanged, much to the chagrin of modern readers and scholars. As a result, two centuries after her most famous novel, people still debate about her creative process and intentions.

In my article, the first half of my title "Of Monsters and Men" includes a titillating reference to the anonymous sentient creation of Mary Shelley in relation to the man who created him. Owing to the understanding that there is no easy binary between the two words "Monsters" and "Men," by the end of the novel, our own understanding of "human," "humanity," and "monstrosity" is complicated. For instance, who is the monster in *Frankenstein*—the man who created and abandoned his creation or the being who was created and was abandoned by his creator? And who is more human—the scientist who repented his mistake or the abhorred being who empathised with distressed and invalid humans?

Although referred to in bestial and non-human terms by his creator (Victor Frankenstein) the "creation" has erroneously come to represent his creator in an ironic reversal of things. Editor and scholar, Charles E. Robinson in the Introduction to *The Original Frankenstein* argues that "Mary Shelley purposefully gave him no name, forcing her readers to reveal their biases by denominating him 'monster', 'creature', 'creation', 'wretch', or 'dæmon.'" Out of all these terms, I would use still use the term "creature" for the unnamed sentient being to avoid the confusion between the creations of Mary Shelley as the author of the novel and Victor Frankenstein as the scientist-creator character of the novel. Also, by terming him as "creature," I am trying to draw attention to his (physical) differences from other human characters which lead to his othering and subsequent marginalisation. This is almost in stark contrast to Mary Shelley's own preference where she rather liked—as a substitute for the character's name in the first dramatic adaptation of the play, which she attended with her father William Godwin (Marshall 95).

Regardless of the intricacies involved in the preferred nomenclature for Victor's created being, one thing is certain, that both the birth as well as the intended death of the creature along with Victor's own death from terrible exhaustion is a damning critique of the enlightenment ideals of the previous century. Scientific advancements by definition were in opposition to Nature, with capital N. The purpose was to tame the latter and "to penetrate the secrets of nature," as Victor himself articulates, for the ultimate progress of mankind (Shelley Ch. II). The inherent violence in the idea was conveniently hidden by layers of utopian visions of development and god-like control. But post-enlightenment, and with the gradual decline of romantic figures and ideals, such ideas were harder to sustain in the long term.

Thus, the purpose of my paper is to address three key areas: (a) how does Mary Shelley introduces the idea of utopia in *Frankenstein* and subsequently undercuts it in the course of the novel; (b) can *Frankenstein* be actually seen as an anti-utopia?; and (c) in what ways can the text be seen as thus? To answer these questions, the following paper is subdivided into two parts. The first part will be a discussion of the terms "utopia," "dystopia," and "anti-utopia" and how their meanings have evolved over time. And the second section will be a discussion of Frankenstein as an anti-utopia by analysing the final scene of the novel. For the purpose of clarity, for citing particular instances, I will use 1831 edition as a primary source with roman chapter numbers in brackets, unless stated otherwise.

Utopia, Anti-Utopia, Dystopia: A General Overview
The concept of "utopia" has been derived from Thomas More's 1516 work of the same name which has given us the understanding of utopia as an imaginary place that is better than the present society. Such a place gradually became associated with the land of bliss, equality, and communal-living, where the inhabitants do not have a cause to be jealous. They are neither competitive nor have exclusive rights over private property (Davis 40). It is not surprising then that in the 18th century England (which was in the throes of enlightenment period) there was both a yearning for this kind of an idealistic space as well as a healthy skepticism about the same. According to Fátima Vieira, in her article "The Concept of Utopia," the so-called "trust in man's capacities" was offset by the fear that perhaps "man was aspiring too high, which would inevitably lead to his fall" (15). As a result, this skepticism gave birth to the opposite of utopia during the 18th century itself and came to be known as "anti-utopia" with the sense of utopia gone awry, in "opposite direction" almost (16). To quote at length from Vieira:

> If utopia is about hope, and satirical utopia is about distrust, anti-utopia is clearly about total disbelief. In fact, in the anti-utopias of the eighteenth century, it was the utopian spirit itself which was ridiculed; their only aim was to denounce the irrelevance and inconsistency of utopian dreaming and the ruin of society it might entail. (16)

This sense of anti-utopia at this point still had elements of hope in it, in the sense of offering an alternative. This was also the time when popular revolutions like the French and the American revolutions were taking place, and in spite of the reign-of-terror following the French revolution, there was still a belief in the revolutionary potential, owing to its exposition by popular figures like Godwin, notwithstanding equally important naysayers like Edmund Burke.

But by the 19th century, there was a slight shift in perceptions owing to the debates about the emancipation of slavery in England along with the expansion of British colonial might overseas. As a result, the aforementioned element of the "alternative" started waning, probably due to the opposite pull of emancipation and colonisation. And with the emergence of a new genre of science-fiction, beginning with *Frankenstein*, anti-utopia further branched into what is now known as "dystopia" or the "bad place." However, the term "dystopia" itself was not coined yet and in its place the word "satirical utopia" as well as "anti-utopia" was still being used. With the advent of the 20th century "dystopia" took on a life of its own and there was a clear demarcation between the "anti-utopia" and "dystopia" as far as theoretical positions was concerned. This was also the era when the genre of "utopia" became a real suspect with the experiences of the totalitarian Soviet regime, Nazism, World Wars, Cold War, technological advancements etc.

As for "anti-utopia," according to Gregory Claeys's book *Dystopia: A Natural History*, there was a gradual development in its separation from the term "dystopia" or "negative utopia." This shift can be traced back to Arthur O. Lewis who formally defined the term "anti-utopia" in 1961 as a depiction of a flawed society which is totally unacceptable to the author and the readers (275). Two years later in 1963 George Kateb described its three major premises, which were "the inevitability of violence in attaining utopian ends; the maintenance of such ends through oppressive regimes; and the destruction of many worthy values in the pursuit of others deemed more valuable" (277). And following Lyman Tower Sargent's arguments Claeys himself attempts to articulate the difference between the two terms wherein "the former [anti-utopia] reject utopianism as such, whereas the latter [dystopia] do not, or do so more obliquely" (290). Further, in the same book, Claeys argues that:

> By the early twentieth century, 'anti-utopia' had emerged to connote 'all fictions that turn utopian dreams into nightmares'. [David W.] Sisk contends that 'dystopia' is preferable to 'anti-utopia' since it actually portrays the 'bad place' rather than merely satirizing the failed pursuit of the good one. Thus, 'all dystopias are anti-utopias, but not all anti-utopias are dystopias.' (283)

So, we can see how even though "dystopia" evokes a negative image and creates a world which is far worse than the (present) times in which it is set it, it still does not let the readers lose hope. On the one hand, while it will warn the readers of the grim future; on the other hand, it will make them realize that to prevent such a future they only need to take the corrective steps in the present. But the same is not case with "anti-utopia." According to Thomas Moylan, in the Preface to his book *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, dystopian texts that do not offer any "alternative" run the risk of turning "into a full-fledged anti-utopia" (iv). Therefore, the element of final hope is crucial to the discussion of anti-utopia. This brings us to our next section.

Frankenstein as an Anti-Utopia
Victor Frankenstein is the epitome of the enterprising and manly scientific mind and is set out to transcend the limits of nature and probability. His ultimate aim is to create a life anew by artificial methods which place him in direct conflict with the seat of God and religion. A

scientific project that is his answer to creating his own progeny, rather slave, is a doomed project and critiqued in no uncertain terms in the Introduction to the 1831 version. However, at the outset of the novel, he is representative of the rational and confident man of the enlightenment era who has a firm belief in the tenets of physical sciences.

The overarching narrative device of Walton's frame story too posit Victor as a deeply tormented and yet admirable figure. While recounting his story to Walton, Victor identifies with his younger listener, and draws parallel with his own youth when he was equally driven for scientific and imperialistic adventures (Shelley Letter IV). This is symptomatic of the utopic scientific ideals of the 18th century which posited reason and rationality as the supreme virtues which were to be lauded and emulated. The possibility of a utopia is also glimpsed in the description of Victor's childhood including his perfect and benevolent set of parents; a comfortable and luxurious upbringing; access to all kinds of expensive books which he can order himself; and Rousseau-istic model of education (Shelley Ch. II).

Gradually this utopia is extended to Victor's act of creating an ideal race with his experiments on the dead and decaying bodies from morgues and charnel-houses (Shelley Chap. IV). Accompanied by the desire to seek the deepest secrets of nature; an interest in electricity and galvanism (Shelley Chap. II); and a blatant disregard of his emotional needs and family in pursuance of his imperialistic projects (Shelley Ch. IV); Victor becomes successful in animating or giving birth to the creature (Shelley Ch. V). Up until the point the creature actually shows the signs of life and scares him, Victor's unhealthy self-absorption in erasing the boundaries of life and death is part and parcel of the utopic vision that he has as a rational scientist. Therefore, the 1818 subtitle of the novel "A Modern Prometheus" elevates his level to the mythic proportion and simultaneously undercut his achievements as something that will bring him and his family a great deal of pain. In the Introduction to the 1831 version, the Mary Shelley further undermines Victor's utopia in these lines:

> I [Mary Shelley] saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—I saw the pale student [Victor Frankenstein] of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing [creature] he had put together…Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken.

And gradually as the story progresses, all the efforts of the creature to integrate into a human society ends in dejection and humiliation, leading him to feeling wrathful against his maker, in this case, Victor. This is the point where the creature's utopia begins to crumble and gradually Victor's own life and that of his family members are caught in the disintegrating whirlpool, with the murder of William (Victor's brother) and the framing of Justine (William's caretaker) for the crime (Shelley Chap. VII). As for Victor, his utopic visions are thwarted at the very moment when he views the abhorrent and ugly fruits of his labours (Shelley Ch V).

Incidentally, the first death in the novel, in Victor's immediate family, is that of Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein (his mother) while tending to the sick Elizabeth Lavenza, the adopted

daughter[2] of the family and his fiancée (Shelley Chap. III). But at this point, the death of his mother does not affect Victor in any major way as compared to the death of William. The latter's death at the hands of the creature sets into motion the irrevocable decline of both Victor and his "Adam."

On taking these factors into account and applying the understanding of anti-utopia derived from the above section, I argue that *Frankenstein* is not a dystopia but an anti-utopia. That is to say that the text offers no alternatives and no hope in the face of the ethical and moral conundrum that it raises. Given that the story represents man's triumphal failure in the face of growing admissibility of his limitations as a human being and the lack of empathy and mistreatment that creates criminals in the society, there are still no remedial actions that are suggested or hinted at. In opposition to this Anne K. Mellor, in her article "Making a 'Monster': An Introduction to Frankenstein," opines that neither the final hope nor the creature is lost in the 1818 version (21). By comparing the end scenes of the two versions, she argues that Mary Shelley's revision of the 1831 text has made it more fatalistic in overall tone, and thereby, making Victor less responsible for his deeds (Mellor 17). Mellor sees it as the move away from the originality of 1818 version, where Victor exercises his free will and through his active choices abandons the creature at its birth. Hence, she sees the difference between these two sentences as a marker of final hope: "he was carried away by the waves, and I soon lost sight of him in the darkness and distance" (1818) and "He was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance" (1831, Mellor 16). Mellor says: "Walton loses sight of him "in the darkness & distance," as Mary Shelley originally wrote, suggesting not only that the creature is still alive but also that his nature, his meaning, remains unfixed, ever available to new interpretations" (Mellor 21).

However, in my view, I feel that the choice of words differs because, in 1818, young Mary was still under the influence of her poet-husband Percy Shelley and father William Godwin, and had hopes in the future of revolutions. But that does not mean that she necessarily held out the possibility of the final hope. When I compare the two endings, I find that the creature's description of suicide by immolation or even the possibility of it accompanied by the desire to be forgotten in death is a deeply pessimistic view of the future and a staunch critique of the entire utopian project of creating him in the first place:

> "But soon," he cried, clasping his hands, "I shall die, and what I now feel will no longer be felt; soon these thoughts—these burning miseries—will be extinct. I shall ascend my pile triumphantly, and the flame that consumes my body will give enjoyment or tranquillity to my mind." (1818)

> "But soon," he cried, with sad and solemn enthusiasm, "I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in place; or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus. Farewell." (1831)

The creature's speech is uncannily similar to Fanny Godwin's suicide note where she notes that perhaps her death will alleviate the suffering of others and be forgotten over time. Interestingly, this desire of being forgotten after death which is only limited to creature's own memories in the previous version: "He is dead who created me; and when I die, the remembrance of *me* will be lost forever" includes Victor too in the latter edition "He is dead who called me into being; and when I shall be no more, the very remembrance of *us both* will speedily vanish" (emphasis added). It is yet another debate whether the creature truly commits suicide or not? But as he himself articulates (like Manfred, the Byronic hero) death is the only way to find peace for him because his once noble life is irrevocably tainted by his crimes— "Polluted by crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death?" (Shelley Chap. XXIV). His ends do not justify the means, even though it was the society itself which turned this "noble savage" capable of honor and love, into a criminal.

And the politics of the times that influenced the writing of the text were such that post-revolution while there was a genuine fear of the populace, there was also an on-going debate about the emancipation of slaves in England where the racial other was still seen as a threat by the upper-class white bourgeoisie. So, the creature has to die and so must the creator who gave birth to such an abomination in the first place because the racial other cannot be integrated into the English society. It was only in 1833, two years later than the 1831 edition, that abolition of slavery could be achieved in England. But by this time ambivalence can be discerned in Mary's own position. After suffering three more deaths of her children including one life-threatening miscarriage, the death of Percy Shelley in1822 and William Godwin in 1826, growing distance with former friends and family, Mary's personal sufferings coloured her revisions and additions of the text of 1831 (Mellor 16).

Thus, in spite of the subtitle called as "Modern Prometheus" and various allusions to Milton's paradise lost, there is no final hope in *Frankenstein*. Unlike Adam who is cherished in Biblical stories by his creator, the creature is abandoned and loathed for his repulsive physical attributes. In his Promethean urge to parallel the status of the creator, Victor must pay the price for his transgression by being haunted by his own creation. Thus, at every step, while Victor is seen as a tormented scientist whose utopic visions of giving birth to a child is turned into an abomination, the painstaking but futile efforts of the creature to learn the language and find companionship amongst humans, partly re-affirms and then dismantles the universal ideals of brotherhood. While Victor aspires to be a god through his creation and the creature wants to be his "Adam," in reality, the former is reduced to being a pathetic fugitive, and the latter is turned into a "fallen angel" or more specifically, a "monster." Both of these instances deal yet another blow to the utopia of technologically assisted birth and the potential father-son relationship in the novel. Seen in this light the creature that Victor Frankenstein gives birth to and later on wants to annihilate by denying him a companion says more about his own self, rather than his enterprising fiend. Even in the De Lacy's household, when the creature hopes to assimilate into the human society on the basis of his empathy, intellect, and compassion, he is driven out by Felix de Lacy (Shelley Ch XVI).

Further, when Victor tears up the female compatriot that the creature so ardently desires, for fear of domination by the ensuing race and miscegenation, it shatters all the hopes of his "Adam" about achieving a utopic acceptance in the human society (Shelley Chap. XX). From its outset to the end the text critiques the over-reaching ambition of men and their treatment of the other race and class. Perhaps it is the because of the failure of the enlightenment project due to which the trust in human and scientific rationality is subdued by the all-encompassing and vengeful nature as Anne Mellor suggests in her essay *Revisiting Frankenstein*. Or, maybe Mary Shelley is satirising her own illustrious father William Godwin by showing the negative potentials of an uncontrolled French mob, as James O'Rourke suggests in his article "The 1831 Introduction and Revisions to "Frankenstein": Mary Shelley Dictates Her Legacy." The reasons can be speculated endlessly about her authorial motives.

However, in the true Coleridgean fashion, where the Ancient Mariner has to suffer a life-in-death, Victor and his creature too must suffer the horrors of upsetting the natural order and the status-quo of the society. Thus, the utopia simply cannot exist and is inverted for both Victor and the creature from very early on in the novel. Nor it is dystopia because the text makes it clear that death is the only logical solution left for either (1818) or both (1831). In conclusion, Mary Shelley's positing of the human frailty at the heart of all Promethean endeavors and making the readers face their own inner psychological "monsters" still does not let the text of Frankenstein become anything else than the deeply disconcerting anti-dystopia that it is.

Notes
1. Charles E. Robinson has done a meticulous research in reconstructing the original 1818 version of *Frankenstein* from the manuscripts housed in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. The book shows both the collaborative version of Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley, with the latter's additions and deletions, as well as the original unedited version of young Mary herself.
2. In 1818 text, Elizabeth Lavenza is Victor's cousin but in the 1831 edition she is an orphan who is adopted by Victor's parents. Mellor succinctly argues the repercussions of both the scenarios in her article "Making a 'Monster': An Introduction to *Frankenstein*." While Mellor prefers the 1818 text over the l831 text citing authenticity of the former, for a more nuanced understanding of the 1831 edition, please refer to James O'Rourke article "The 1831 Introduction and Revisions to 'Frankenstein': Mary Shelley Dictates Her Legacy."

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