

Revisiting *Frankenstein*: A Transhumanist Reading

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Abstract

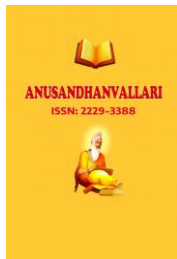
The paper entitled “Revisiting *Frankenstein*: A Transhumanist Reading” aims to revisit Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* through the lens of Transhumanism. The novel was written in the early nineteenth century, long before the emergence of transhumanist thought but it raises questions that strongly resonate with contemporary debates about the use of science and technology to transcend human limitations. The transhumanist desire to surpass natural boundaries is embodied in the character of Victor Frankenstein. He tries to discover the secret of life and creates a new being through scientific experimentation. His ambition to unlock the mysteries of creation reflects the modern aspiration to enhance or redesign human life through technological means. The creature produced by Victor can be interpreted as a proto-transhuman figure that exists at the intersection of the human and the artificial, challenging conventional definitions of humanity, identity, and embodiment. At the same time, the tragic consequences of Victor’s experiment reveal the ethical dilemmas associated with unchecked scientific ambition. By examining the novel through a transhumanist perspective, this study argues that *Frankenstein* anticipates many contemporary concerns about biotechnology, artificial life, and the future of humanity. Thus, the novel remains highly relevant in discussions about the possibilities and dangers of transcending the human condition.

Keywords: Humanism, Transhumanism, Anthropocentrism, Prometheus, Human enhancement

Humanism marked a shift away from the medieval God centered thinking toward a human-centered worldview. This perspective places human reason, dignity and potential at the center. The human capacity for intellectual and moral development was celebrated. Empirical observation and critical thinking was valued over scholastic dogma. The renewed interest in realism reflected confidence in human creativity. Human beings were seen as capable of shaping their own destiny. The concept of humanism progressed gradually across historical periods. During the Enlightenment period, Humanism aligned with science and reason. There was an emphasis on rational enquiry and empirical knowledge. The ability of human beings to think independently was highlighted. The concept of humanism became universal.

The accelerated growth of science and technology in and after the twentieth century brought about developments in science and technology, especially in areas like genetics, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, robotics, digital technology etc. The possibility to enhance the human body and mind beyond natural limits could be imagined by then. Technology began to be considered as a means to improve human evolution. There emerged the belief that biological limits like aging, diseases and even death could be overcome through the effective use of technology. Thinkers were encouraged to imagine technologically enhanced humans in future. Modern developments in digital culture strengthened the idea that human mind could be extended and consciousness could merge with machines.

In the succeeding centuries questions were raised regarding the idea of human superiority. New critical concepts like Posthumanism and Transhumanism emerged in the twenty first century in response to Humanism. The Eurocentric, rationalistic and anthropocentric assumptions were seen as a threat to the other forms and life by the posthumanists. According to them the human future itself will be endangered. On the other hand,



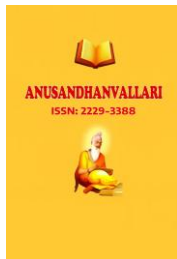
transhumanism embraced Enlightenment and its principles and stood for the promotion of science and technology. Human being could go beyond the limits of our biology and become “more than human” or “transhuman”.

In her article “Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, and New Materialism” Francesca Ferranda, the Italian philosopher and posthuman theorist, critically examines what it means to be human in an age shaped by technology and global interconnectedness. She differentiates the two terms “posthumanism” and “transhumanism”. By repositioning humans within a broader planet and ecological context, posthumanism challenges anthropocentrism. It decenters human as the central subject of philosophical and ethical enquiry. In contrast, transhumanism is focused on enhancing humans through technology. A kind of rethinking of what it means to be human is important and urgent why because so many changes are happening in science and technology during the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Both these concepts see human beings as changeable according to the context be it social, be it cultural, be it political. But at the same time they also have a lot of differences. These two movements come from different backgrounds and have different perspectives as well.

Transhumanism challenges how we understand humans and is more interested in what humans might become in the future. It focuses on how biology and technology could change and improve humans. They look up to what these humans become in future especially in the context of the advancement in science and technology. They really think we can make humans better not just fix problems but make us even stronger smarter and healthier. Transhumanists believe that science and technology are the keys to make this happen. We have many advanced scientific and technological inventions. We have regenerative medicines which help us heal, we have nanotechnology working with very tiny cells or tiny stuff, we have other ideas like mind uploading and cryonics like freezing bodies etc. So with the help of all these scientific and technological inventions we can make the life of humans better. So this is what the transhumanist aim. They believe that humanity has not reached its full potential and there are lots and lots of exciting possibilities for the future. We still have many things to explore and enjoy with the help of Science and Technology.

The term “transhumanism” was popularized by Julian Huxley in 1957. The central point is that technological evolution allows us to evolve rapidly towards a new humanity termed as Humanity 2.0 or H+. Humanity 2.0 is the “posthuman” according to transhumanists' thought. H+ is the intermediate stage between the mortal man of today and another evolutionary stage which transcends the human condition and becomes a man-machine hybrid. This is seen as a natural continuation of our development and evolution by the transhumanists. The main idea of transhumanists is that at some point we will have the opportunity to live forever in the technologies of the future that will save us from old age. Also with the help of technology we obtain excellent physical abilities to save us from fatigue, to make us faster, stronger and more flexible.

In a 1957 essay titled "Transhumanism," Huxley discussed the idea that humans transcend their current limitations through the use of science and technology. His vision is rooted in evolutionary biology and the belief that humans can use their intelligence and creativity to control their own evolutionary destiny. Thus they can overcome the constraints of natural selection and biological evolution. Science and technology could be used to enhance human capabilities and thus humans can attain a higher level of existence by overcoming any limitations. Huxley's concept of transhumanism laid the groundwork for the modern transhumanist movement. The movement has evolved over the years to include many views and ideas regarding the future of humanity, the potential of advanced technologies, and the nature of consciousness and identity in a highly technologically enhanced world. While Julian Huxley is often credited with popularizing the term "transhumanism", it is important to note that the concept itself and its various philosophical and technological aspects have been influenced by the works and ideas of many authors and thinkers around the world over the years.



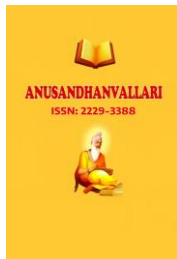
Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* has been variously categorized as "gothic novel", "epistolary novel" and "science fiction". However the novel is seen today as an exploration of transhumanist ideas as it anticipates the core concerns of modern transhumanism; especially the desire to overcome human limitations through science. The novel begins with four letters written by Robert Walton to his sister Mrs. Margaret Saville, while he is on an expedition to explore the North pole. Written in epistolary form, the novel employs flashback technique which has been compared to a Chinese box – a structure of stories within stories. Robert Walton's expedition to explore the arctic regions brings him in contact with the principal narrator Victor Frankenstein. The near to death Victor Frankenstein is brought back to health by Robert Walton. Victor narrates his quest to find the secrets of life to Walton. In it he narrates the monster he has created. In this he is driven by his intense desire to overcome the limits of human existence.

Victor Frankenstein ambitiously seeks forbidden knowledge. He is fascinated by the works of medieval alchemists like Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magnus. His obsession with the knowledge shared by these people, whose findings are dismissed by modern science, reveals Victor's ambition to dominate nature. He longs to, "pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" (Shelley 46). Victor uses knowledge not just to serve humanity but he believes that he can achieve God like authority through knowledge. His ambition is intensified as his studies advanced in the University of Ingolstadt. The monster created by Victor has become the center of discussions in humanity and technology. After studying chemistry, anatomy and natural philosophy, he discovers the method of animating lifeless matter. He collects body parts from graveyards, charnel houses and dissecting rooms. Large body parts were selected because it was difficult to work with microscopic human structures. He assembled the body parts into a gigantic human-like body. He then might have applied galvanism to bring body to life.

His actions are unchecked by moral reflection. He transcends the boundary between natural philosophy and divine creation. He sacrifices his relations in pursuit of intellectual mastery. He engages in relentless labour. He is transformed both mentally and physically. When the creature came to life, Victor was horrified as the creature had yellow skin, watery eyes, and unnatural proportions. Overcome with fear and disgust, Victor abandons the creature immediately after creating it. The scientific curiosity of the era is reflected in adopting the idea of galvanism and we see that the people were fascinated by the possibility of reanimating life through technological means.

From a modern perspective, the creature can be seen as an example of a transhuman being. In the novel, Victor Frankenstein's experiment reflects a transhumanist ambition: the desire to surpass the natural boundaries of human life. By assuming the role of a creator, he imagines that his newly created monster will be superior to ordinary human beings. It is indeed a transhuman figure as it represents a technologically produced being beyond ordinary human biology. His exceptional qualities included the ability to resist extreme cold, to travel long distances and remarkable physical power. Victor succeeded in animating lifeless matter but he is afraid of his creation. His application of knowledge is incomplete and irresponsible. He fails to foresee or accept the consequences of his creation. The Enlightenment belief in reason leading to progress has been questioned, emphasizing the need of ethical responsibility.

Robert Walton's ideas can also be interpreted in the light of the transhumanist thinking. He also has the ambition to move beyond ordinary human limits, though not excessive like Victor. In his letters, he writes to his sister that he wants to achieve something great by exploring the North Pole. He dreams of discovering unknown lands and scientific secrets. He says, "I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man" (7). His intention is to discover secrets that could benefit humanity. His ambition reflects the transhumanist idea that humans can



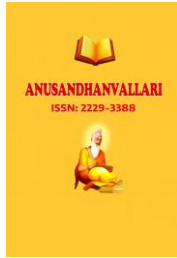
expand their knowledge, power and control over nature. But when faced by the destruction of his crew, he chooses to abandon his quest which shows his moral restraint.

Victor's creation of the monster blurs the distinction between the human and the non-human. The creature is abandoned after its creation and is denied education. He is not given a companion and there is nobody to give it moral instruction. Still it acquires knowledge through observation. It learned language and imbibed human emotions. He becomes capable of empathy and develops self-awareness. He is called a monster because of his frightening appearance. But he is portrayed as a rational and eloquent being. He is far more natural and humane than the father who rejects him and the villagers who stone him. He begins to demonstrate violent behavior only when he is faced by the viciousness of human society. Modern critics analyses the monster through the transhumanist lens. In the first place it is created artificially. It is given life through galvanism, using scientific ideas beyond natural biological processes. It is physically more capable than human beings which reiterates the transhumanist idea of enhancing human abilities through scientific intervention. It is infested with human abilities and intelligence but it has an artificial body assembled from dead matter. It has a hybrid status-between human and artificial life - which is a key idea in transhuman theory. The monster can be interpreted as a proto-transhuman figure, an early representation of a creature created through science, which surpasses natural human limits.

Victor Frankenstein's obsessive pursuit of the power to create life exemplifies a distinctly anthropocentric worldview. His act of creation mirrors the broader cultural tendency to subordinate non-human existence to human desire and ambition. The creature occupies a liminal position that exposes the arbitrary and self-serving nature of anthropocentric hierarchies. His eloquence, suffering, and capacity for moral reasoning challenge the reader to reconsider the boundaries of personhood and ethical obligation. Shelley also critiques anthropocentrism through the novel's ecological dimensions. The natural world ultimately destroys the human protagonists, suggesting that nature resists the anthropocentric impulse to master it. The refusal to extend empathy beyond human boundaries leads to mutual destruction. Frankenstein thus presents a cautionary vision of a world in which the privileging of human exceptionalism forecloses the possibility of ethical coexistence.

Transhumanism advocating the use of technology to enhance human abilities brings with it very significant social and existential dangers. The very definition of humanity could be threatened by pursuing this concept. There is a possibility of creating a two-tiered society by splitting humanity into different classes like those possessing super cognitive and physical abilities and those who do not possess it. The problem is that these enhancements could be affordable only to the wealthy. Those who cannot enhance themselves could face stigmatization and be considered inferior. Human beings could be stripped off dignity by treating human body as a machine or a product. Critics like Francis Fukuyama states that fundamental human limitations provide the context for human meaning and purpose and without limitations like aging, the existence could be hollow or artificial. Also there is the danger of depending too much on technology as human beings can become vulnerable and be controlled by the creators of these technologies. There will not be a fixed idea of what constitutes a person. Integrating technology cannot find solutions to the pressing issues like poverty, disease, climate change and environmental hazards and can ultimately lead to existential risks.

Mary Shelley does not condemn scientific inquiry outright; rather, she cautions against blind ambition driven by ego, glory, and domination. *Frankenstein* presents ambition and the pursuit of knowledge as complex and potentially destructive forces. Through Victor Frankenstein's tragic experience and Robert Walton's moral awakening, Shelley argues that knowledge must be guided by responsibility, humility, and empathy. The novel remains profoundly relevant in the modern world, where scientific and technological advancements continue to raise ethical questions. *Frankenstein* ultimately warns that when ambition overreaches moral limits, the pursuit of knowledge can lead not to enlightenment, but to ruin.



Shelley's subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*, also has significance. Prometheus, defied gods and stole fire for humanity. Fire is the symbol of power. In the novel Victor transgresses the human limits to discover the secret of life and creates a living being from dead matter. This uncontrolled ambition leads to danger. Prometheus is given physical torture as punishment for his crime but Victor suffers psychologically. His experiment leads to the death of his beloved and also to his destruction. Still Prometheus is seen as the symbol of human progress as he brings the light of knowledge to humanity. Victor is called the "Modern Prometheus" because he challenges the natural process of birth and creation by producing life through scientific experimentation. The title suggests that although knowledge and progress are powerful, they can also bring disaster if used recklessly. Mary Shelley cautions readers about the dangers of scientific ambition without moral responsibility. She thus revises the Promethean myth to question the glorification of rebellion, warning that human beings are ill-equipped to assume divine roles without ethical maturity. Through this story, Mary Shelley presents a powerful critique of unchecked scientific ambition. The novel warns that technological progress without ethical responsibility can lead to tragedy. Thus, *Frankenstein* remains an important literary text for understanding the complex relationship between science, humanity, and the dream of transcending human limits. *Frankenstein* serves as both an early imaginative exploration and a cautionary warning about transhumanist aspirations.

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