

Nature, Isolation, and Human Identity in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: An Ecocritical Reading

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Abstract

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; or, *The Modern Prometheus* is often seen as a story about hubris in science and the dangers of creation and the horrors of neglect. This essay analyzes *Frankenstein* in the light of an ecocritical reading, suggesting that nature in *Frankenstein* is not just a background but an active participant in the psychological and moral development of both Victor Frankenstein and the creature. Victor Frankenstein's attempt to control the dynamics of life and death cuts him off from his family, from society, and from moral duties; he finds solace (and is unable to fully accept it) in the Alpine and Arctic landscapes around him. The creature, on the other hand, makes progress in the realms of sensation, language, sympathy, and self-awareness through contact with cold, hunger, fire, forests, seasonal changes, and through observation of the De Lacey family. But the latter's rejection and lack of companionship divert these powers toward anger and vengeance. This essay argues that in *Frankenstein* we see an understanding of human identity as relational (not fixed) and constituted through ecological experience, language, sympathy, recognition and responsibility. By reference to Dana Phillips's critique of ecocritical realism and recent work by Shamim/Sahu/Dwivedi, this reading also complicates the simple idea of nature as refuge and frames *Frankenstein* within current debates on anthropocentrism and environmental ethics.

Keywords: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ecocriticism, nature, isolation, human identity, scientific ambition, social rejection

Introduction

No novel has so persistently been read through the prism of creation as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In 1818 she wrote a story of a young student of natural philosophy who looks for the secret of life, puts together a being with life and then, repelled by the result, abandons his creature to his own devices in the hostile world. Most attention has focused on the ethics of scientific knowledge, the Gothic paraphernalia of the novel, the fraught relationship between Victor and the creature. All these things are crucial. But we are left with little room to explore the question that pops up almost every time through the novel. What is the role of the natural world in the shaping of the people who traverse it? Mountains, glaciers, lakes, storms, forests, the frozen wildernesses of the arctic feature repeatedly in the text. And these things consistently align with the affective states of the characters.

I would argue that nature in *Frankenstein* plays a very important role as an active agent in the psychological/moral development of both the creature and Victor. In terms of Victor, by trying to control the nature of life and death, Victor cuts himself off from family, society, and moral responsibility. And the landscapes he sees provide the consolation he cannot fully accept. For the creature, the first encounters

with cold, hunger, fire, forests, change of seasons and so on are making him aware of himself and his capacity to use language and empathize. But in denying him companionship and repeatedly rejecting his look, all those capacities are turning into anger and desire for revenge. In this sense, the human identity in Shelley's novel is relational. It is formed in dialogue with the environment, language, the ability to be sympathetic, and the kind of recognition (or non-recognition) other people give you.

Dana Phillips's essay "Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology" challenges some common realist assumptions of ecocritical reading and serves as a useful warning against the easy refuge for nature away from culture (Phillips 577-78, 585). Shamim, Sahu, and Dwivedi's recent overview of ecocriticism in contemporary fiction provides some contextualizing of the reading in terms of current concerns with anthropocentrism, environmental ethics, and the presence of nature in the narrative (Shamim et al. 405-06, 411-13). And while Frankenstein is more than century-and-a-half ahead of the official development of ecocriticism, this approach to Frankenstein is necessarily retrospective and does not suggest that Shelley writes in a modernly ecological way but tries to explain what the novel discloses by considering the novel's environments.

Ecocriticism, Representation, and Frankenstein

According to Shamim et al. the approach of Ecocriticism can be described as an interdisciplinary method of literary and cultural analysis that focuses on the interplay of literature and physical environment and questions anthropocentric views of the world. They point out that it has arisen during the 1990s as a response to the increased awareness of an ecological crisis. They emphasize on the fact that in recent fiction, nature appears as an "active and dynamic presence" (Shamim et al. 406) instead of a passive backdrop. This is a helpful way to view Frankenstein. But it has to be used with care. Because Frankenstein by Mary Shelley is so much older. Much earlier than the time when 'ecological crisis' became a frequent topic of public discussion. And it engages with nature through Romantic aesthetics, natural philosophy and Gothic conventions, not late 20th century environmentalism.

In his essay, Dana Phillips performs a much needed service to the occasionally quick trigger nature-commitment reading by ecocritics. With respect to the literary text, Phillips offers a reminder that nature is complex. It is thoroughly implicated with culture and vice versa. Nature is implicated with culture (577-78). This has a particular relevance to the Frankenstein novel, in that there is no pure natural world untouched by human meaning. Victor's visit to the Alps is already filled with the rhetoric of the sublime. The creature's interpretation of nature is filtered through the books that he finds and the family he observes. Phillips reminds us not to expect too easily for the text to deliver its readers out of the constraints of culture and into the unmediated truth of nature. He asserts that nature cannot deliver one out of the constraints of culture. Likewise, culture cannot deliver one out of the constraints of nature. (585). Shelley's novel is about the trouble with this very problem. Nature provides comfort and instruction for the characters of the novel. It does not set the characters free from the social and linguistic structures that shape their identity. He also mentions a kind of ongoing interpretative process where one switches between the world and text. And how things like binoculars or field guides open up new kinds of understanding (Phillips 596). This is a helpful suggestion for Frankenstein, even if it is one that Phillips makes in terms of birding guides. The creature has a series of mediated experiences in which he learns about the world: the fire he encounters, the food he tries to harvest, the books he reads, the speech he overhears in the De Lacey cottage. Knowledge is never a direct transcription of nature for the creature. It is always built up through a series of transactions between sensation and language and the human world. This is what makes the novel useful

to ecocritical analysis despite being an unusual text for nature writing. Its environments are always in conjunction with interpretation, and its characters are always learning to read them.

Scientific Ambition and Victor's Self-Isolation

Victor's attitude towards nature starts with curiosity and then becomes a struggle of dominance. In the initial stages of learning, the promises of control over nature's world by the alchemical and natural-philosophical writers attract him and he turns away from the comforts of family and home life. This stage, according to the novel is, an intellectual passion but is also, at the same time, an ecological position. Victor wants to know the principle of life and wants to go beyond the rules of birth, decay and death. It is also his aspiration that the natural world is the set of processes that can be comprehended, controlled and finally enhanced, by the human mind. When you read about the anthropocentrism described by Shamim, Sahu and Dwivedi, Victor's work seems to be a clear example of humans who position themselves above the natural order and resist the limits set by natural order (Shamim et al. 411-12).

The crucial image of this attitude is the laboratory in which Victor constructs his creature. This is an enclosed, artificial space, separated from weather, seasons, and the open landscape which in the novel elsewhere provides comfort. At night, with bones and body parts to gather, Victor constructs his creature in a room separated from the world of living things. The importance of this contrast. The natural processes over which Victor claims mastery are not present, instead there is the mechanical process of human decisions. And Victor is shocked when the creature opens its eyes. He runs out of the room rather than staying and assuming responsibility for his creation. But this is not just an individual failure of moral temperament. It is the logical result of the attitude towards nature in which nature exists for us to control, and the creature exists for the fulfilment of scientific ambition.

Victor's isolation is not limited to the laboratory. He sickens after the creation, then relapses to a domestic life that he cannot fully inhabit. He receives letters from family members about home. He can't speak of the creature or his guilt. By keeping secret, he is apart from those who love him, from the moral community within whose concerns he might have acted responsibly. Thus, Victor's isolation is not caused by nature, but is the consequence of his refusal of a relational account of himself. He wants to have knowledge without accountability, power without sympathy, creation without the responsibilities of creation. This refusal is directly responsible for his estrangement from his family and society. His experience of being beyond the ordinary human world also reinforces this experience.

Nature as Consolation and Moral Counterforce

Victor's alienation does not entail indifference to nature. The experiences of his sojourns in the countryside around Geneva, when he makes his way away from Ingolstadt, seem to reawaken something in him that his experiments have dulled: the nature of mountains, lakes and glaciers fills the book with amazement and relief of emotion. This is the way nature could be conceived when Victor takes journeys through the Alps, or across the Mer de Glace, full of wonder and comfort in the majesty and eternity of nature; a temporary antidote for guilt and despair. Nature thus becomes an opposite to the artificial environment of the lab and the destructive logic of Victor's desire.

But this relief is short lived. Nature does not prompt a reassessment of his duty towards the creature in Victor. Rather, the natural world becomes a refuge for him, a private haven where he may temporarily leave behind the trauma he has caused. Often, the storms and the glaciers that tower above him, are a reflection of his own storm. Yet, the novel does not suggest that the power of nature is a lesson that Victor

learns. The mountains reflect his sentiments, but they don't reshape his conscience. In fact, as per Shamim, Sahu, and Dwivedi, in modern ecocritical fiction, nature experience is increasingly used to build "environmental empathy" and ethical engagement (412). Shelley's novel would be an earlier, more brittle version of that. For Victor, nature is capable of producing an emotional response, but that response does not immediately lead to ethical action.

It's key for any approach that sees nature as a moral retreat. Here the insights provided by Phillips's critique of overly simplistic ecocritical assertions about the environment are valuable, because it reminds us that the experience of the environment is always mediated by culture and that on its own it cannot provide us with a truth, a virtue (Phillips 585). The way Victor approaches the Alps is informed by the sublime aesthetic vocabulary as well as his own self-absorption. In the landscape he has something to feel, but it doesn't force him to acknowledge the being he's become. So the novel doesn't give us nature as purely redemptive. It is a strong presence in the emotional lives of the characters, but its moral value is linked to how they interpret and react to it.

The Creature's Ecological Education and Formation of Identity

The creature experiences a radically different set of early experiences to Victor. Left in the world, the creature encounters the physical world not guided by any human. He experiences cold, hunger, the extreme intensity of light, confusion, fire's warmth and the shelter of the forest. These are the novel records them as the basis of his consciousness. He has sensation before he has language and this sensation becomes the means by which he begins to experience pleasure and pain, safety and danger. The seasons have an impact on his development as well; in winter he learns to seek shelter and food and during the course of the year, the shifts of light teach him the seasonal rhythms of the natural world in which he must survive.

The Background experience is not a passive experience, It is formative. The creature must learn to read these experiences. Fire warms but it also has the potential to harm him. Forest is shelter and it is dangerous in the potential of solitude. In this way, his early education may be compared to the kind of mediated knowledge that Phillips speaks of when he describes the movement between text and world and the development of interpretive tools in the process of experience (Phillips 596). The creature may lack a field guide, but he has the process of repeated experience and reflection which becomes a mode of understanding. This is where the emphasis placed on the active role of nature in the narrative by Shamim, Sahu and Dwivedi is very useful. For, it is not a passive environment in Shelley's novel, but a set of conditions that affect the creature's capacities (Shamim et al. 406, 413).

The crucial moment in the formation of the creature is in the observation of the De Lacey family. The creature hiding in a hovel beside their cottage, overhears, copies and discovers the elements of their language, learns the emotional ties that make them a family. In other words, through observation the creature acquires language and moral sensibility. He can pick up the signs of affection, the expressions of sorrow, the acts of kindness that characterize the human community. The creature sympathizes with Felix and Agatha and Safie. He imagines his presence in this kind of relationship. Clearly, the novel states that the formation of his identity is not only biological but through the relation, the attention, the imitation that brings him into connection with others.

Therefore the education of the creature combines the experience of the environment and the learning of the social. In the forest, in the seasonal changes, the creature learns to feel, to survive. In the household of the De Lacey he learns language, sympathy and expectation of recognition. The formation of his identity combines the two. This is why the novel rejects the idea that the creature is naturally monstrous. It shows

him as sensitive, curious and a lover of affection. The development of the moral sensibility is the same as the acquisition of knowledge about the world. It is not that in nature he is good but that his formation needs the relation with the environment and the human beings.

Social Rejection, Otherness, and the Ethics of Recognition

The creature's hopes are dashed when he seeks out the De Lacey family and makes himself known. The response of the family, Felix, Agatha, and Safie, is horror and disgust. Only the blind father, perhaps, could have heard the creature without prejudice. It is not so much the creature's words and deeds but his appearance that determines the family's reaction. The creature is judged by his body, not allowed the recognition that could have been won by his speech and sympathy. The moment is crucial to the novel's thesis about identity. The forms of human relations are known by the creature, but are denied him because of the shape he carries. It is not just an individual loss; it is a social act that marks the creature as other. The effects of the denial are drastic. The creature seeks out Victor, requesting a companion, demanding a companion. A loved being could be good, the creature argues. This is an argument over the issue of relational identity. The creature is not demanding mastery over others but a relation that would establish his place in the world. Victor's refusal to create the female companion. (and later destruction of the female creature) closes off the possibility of recognition. The reaction of the creature is rage, followed by determination to take revenge. Hence, the violence of the creature is most fruitfully interpreted as the redirection of frustration sympathy. The nature of the creature is not suggested to be intrinsically evil. Rather, the novel illustrates the transformation of his abilities into a desire for vengeance as a result of the denial of companionship.

The modern ecocriticism is related to issues of environmental justice and how the margin of social groups face the burden of ecological and social injustice (Shamim et al. 411-13). While, Shelley is not really writing on the issue of environmental justice in the modern sense, one can see a similar concept in the exclusion of the creature, as an example of the same idea, where his vulnerability is defined by social prejudice and his needs are dismissed because it is inconvenient for the powers that be. However, the creature is not a victim of nature alone. He is a victim of the human world that refuses to accept him as a part of shared life. And here, Frankenstein presents that the ethical responsibility is not only the protection of nature, but also the acceptance of those who are excluded from the community of the human.

The Arctic Pursuit and the Limits of Nature

The final chapter of the novel brings the chase from the European landscape to the arctic landscape. The most extreme of all natural landscapes, that of the polar regions, with all their ice and darkness, completely seem to alienate both Victor and the creature from human society. Victor, compelled to follow the creature on the ice with the too late sense of duty to repair the damage done, while the creature traverses his native landscape, which he now endures but finds no company in, the arctic is the ultimate demonstration of the insufficiency of nature to provide any kind of moral sanctuary. The arctic is vast and powerful but does not solve the problem of the conflict between Victor and the creature. In the end the chase is the death and silence not the resolution.

In the final scenes, then, the point of the novel is underscored. The whole of Frankenstein is a text in which nature is a force, affecting emotion, perception and the possibilities for survival. But it cannot provide the recognition, responsibility and sympathy that is the need of human identity. The isolation of Victor stems from his refusal to accept the relations that bind him to others, while the misery of the creature grows from

denial of these relations to him. Phillips's observation about the impossibility of escaping from nature/culture is helpful to clarify this point (Phillips 577-78, 585). There is no way back to nature as an alternative to social life, but rather the question of identity becomes one with the question of the ways of life of humans with each other and with nature.

Conclusion

More specifically, the essay has argued that in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* nature is a dynamic force in the shaping of identity. For Victor, nature is a source of consolation and a fleeting relief, but his will to control the processes of nature alienates him from family, society, and responsibility. For the creature, the forests, seasons, fire, and weather are all an opening for sensation and an early move towards understanding. But then, watching the DeLacys as a family will provide the language of sensation and sympathy, and moral sensibility. But the refusal of company and a rejection of how he looks takes all those resources and channels them into anger and revenge. In this way, Shelley's novel gives us a model of relationality for identity that is shaped by ecological experience, language, sympathy, recognition, and responsibility.

Understanding this novel with the lens of ecocriticism does not mean we need to set Mary Shelley up as a modern forerunner of environmentalism, or that we can assume that nature always generates virtue. The critique of realist assumptions that Phillips makes is important, in that it reminds us how intertwined nature and culture are, and how we always interpret environmental experience (Phillips 577-78, 596). And the work that Shamim, Sahu, and Dwivedi do on contemporary ecocriticism helps us to understand why it is important to think about the novel in this way, because it points to nature as dynamic, as well as issues of the ethics of anthropocentrism, and of the social nature of environmental and human suffering (Shamim et al. 406, 411-13). And *Frankenstein* is still potent for these kinds of questions, because it brings both the consolations of nature into play as well as their limits. So the creature learns to live in the world through sensation and sympathy, but without the human recognition that would make that learning into a shared life.

The scope of this study is limited in that it is a concentrated reading of the text, based on the synopsis given and the two scholarly articles provided to me. This is not an overall exploration of *Frankenstein's* criticism. There are many critical approaches that are very important to the work: feminist, psychoanalytic, historical readings, etc. that have been left undeveloped in this piece of work. However, through a close ecocritical reading, we can see how the landscape, season, environmental experience, etc., can further our understanding of Victor and the creature. *Frankenstein* and Shelley's novel forces us to ask: can we see ourselves in the other beings we create and meet? The environment (nature) can teach and console *Frankenstein*, but can't give the answers for us.

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