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Frankenstein’s creature: Posthuman or Transhuman?

General discourse on the posthuman and transhuman has been highly engaged with since its introduction in the late 20th century, spanning many disciplines and becoming increasingly relevant today in the age of scientific innovation. However, their scholarly renderings have been largely theoretical projections, and, due to relatively recent conceptualizations, the two terms are often interchangeably used in scholarly conversation when actually they characterize distinct conditions. This becomes a problem when constructing knowledge as scholars cannot consistently build on each other’s ideas while applying different understandings to the same terms. The solution comes through *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (1818), a novel that realizes futuristic human transcendence through its science fiction privilege. Through Frankenstein’s creature, scholars can go beyond conceptual speculation and objectify the concept of being beyond-human, thus move towards a more concrete and clarified consensus on what the transhuman and posthuman truly entail.

In this essay, I define the term “transhuman” as a human who becomes advanced through technological enhancements and additives (Sandu 4). On the other hand, the “posthuman” is a hypothetical being that is no longer human individual per se, but exists as a part of intertwined systems, transcending to the extent that they are no longer biologically defined (Sandu 13) or on the same evolutionary line as the human species. Based on these definitions, I will investigate the question: How does Frankenstein’s creature, as a realized form of human transcendence, facilitate distinction between theoretically-rendered transhuman and posthuman conditions? To answer this, I will first outline my comparative parameters with reference to Sandu’s theoretical analysis to distinguish the two labels. Using that framework, my main focus is on comparing my analysis of the *Frankenstein* text with the orchestrated conversation between Carretero-Gonzalez and Cimatti in their arguments to assess whether Frankenstein’s creature achieved a posthuman condition. Carretero-Gonzalez claims the creature had been by virtue of design born posthuman, while Cimatti argues that though the creature’s body behaves in a posthuman way his psyche that is “too human” (10) inhibits him from becoming fully posthuman. In opposition to Carretero-Gonzalez and mostly sympathetic to Cimatti, I argue that Frankenstein’s creature had been transhuman in all aspects except for his appearance which appears posthuman, thus contend that to become a posthuman, the outer state of transcendence must be accompanied by the inner, and until then the being should be recognized as transhuman.

Firstly, my comparative parameters for the transhuman and posthuman concentrate on functional and ontological distinctions, and integrate specific criteria put forth by Sandu. In terms of function, the transhuman by definition acquires enhanced physicality and physical ability. In contrast, this trait is totally irrelevant in the posthuman; the capacity for bodily improvements is instead traded for immortality, defined as the “conservation of self-consciousness” (4) by Sandu, that is, a consciousness that exists regardless of biological or pathological dangers. The ability to be immortal is attributed to the posthuman’s “dissolution of ontological borders” (Sandu 12) as a being intertwined within multiple non-human systems, as opposed to the transhuman who remains a singular body, ontologically equivalent to an ordinary human. Because the posthuman existence takes place in a radically different form, the development of their psyche presumably diverges as well. Sandu identifies in particular the potential loss of a human’s “personal identity … life motivation, and the will to survive” (14) as a result of immortality, which is therefore conversely preserved in the transhuman.

From a functional perspective, Frankenstein’s creature appears to be a transhuman that is unwillingly granted posthuman peculiarity. The enhanced physicality of a transhuman is demonstrated in Frankenstein’s description of the creature’s design, being of “gigantic stature” (Shelley 33) with facial features that Frankenstein had selected for its “beaut[y]” (Shelley 35). Another transhumanist physical upgrade is his unnatural mode of conception via assemblage of dead body parts, thereby removing biological dependency on the female body to produce offspring, which Cimatti also notes is an advantage for the creature to begin life as an “already … mature and strong body” (16) as opposed to growing up from infancy. Conversely but incorrectly, Carretero-Gonzalez uses this bypass of heterosexual reproduction to argue that the creature is posthuman rather than transhuman. She cites Frankenstein’s words which deem his creation a “new species” (Shelley 32) to claim that “Frankenstein actually envisages the posthuman” (56), thus framing her entire analysis of the creature as a demonstration of posthuman traits. This is a misguided interpretation, as although becoming a different species *is* a characteristic of the posthuman, it is not the *defining* one. What defines the posthuman is the shift in ontological state, and since the creature is clearly a singular body, it is inaccurate to identify him as posthuman. Carretero-Gonzalez’s subsequent contentions are thus shown to be proving only transhuman traits. Two which fit under the functional perspective are her arguments for the creature’s physical and intellectual superiority, which cite the creature’s self-analysis of his inherent above-average physical ability (Shelley 83) and faster linguistic ability than Safie (57) respectively. Although true, both are distinctly traits of the transhuman and not the posthuman.

The above evidences assure that Frankenstein’s creature, in terms of functional qualities, is transhuman rather than posthuman. The creature also does not possess immortality as he presumably terminates his consciousness through suicide at the end of the novel. However, an interesting attribute to consider is that Frankenstein’s central goal of creation was to defy materials subject to mortality, to “renew life where death had apparently devoted the body” (Shelley 33). He does not *bestow* life, but *renew* it—there is an implied reference to formerly living existence thus formerly existing consciousness. While it is not conserving consciousness per se, the creature’s consciousness implies continuation of the previously mortal; therefore it can be argued that he possesses an extent of posthuman immortality.

On the other hand, the creature’s ontological existence is fully transhuman, or rather, human, which is not only reflected in his physical form as mentioned before but also his psychological tendencies. The creature holds all attributes of the human condition of which the posthuman loses in their immortality as outlined by Sandu, recall that being “personal identity, life motivation, and the will to survive” (14). His sense of personal identity is shown in his reoccurring contemplations of “Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come?” (Shelley 89), which demonstrates his perception of a converging point of origins for a singular psyche. This is supported by Cimatti’s interpretation of this passage as he uses it to show how the creature fits into Lacan’s human psychoanalytic theory, specifically, the “mirror stage” in infancy. Furthermore, the creature clearly communicates life motivation when he asks his creator for a companion with whom he can peacefully live out the rest of his life, ultimately so that “in [his] dying moments, [he] shall not curse” (Shelley 103). He also exhibits an intuitive will to survive through his behavioral adaptation to the natural world, specifically in his utilization of fire and foraging skills (Shelley 71-72).

Based on this evidence, it can be concluded that the creature’s ontological state and consequent psyche exists in a wholly human condition, which is preserved in the transhuman and not the posthuman. However, Cimatti argues that the creature in his earliest stages of life exhibit a hint of posthuman existential state, referring to the scene when he first escapes from Frankenstein into the forest and describes his sensory perception as being “confused and indistinct” (Shelley 70). Cimatti interprets this passage as the creature being “simply part of what is taking place” (23), a passive attitude reflective of a being that does not comprehend itself as an individual entity with subjectivity, but as a “block of becoming” (23) in reference to Deleuze and Guattari’s theoretical characterization of the posthuman. Nonetheless, this does not suffice as conclusive evidence to indicate any extent of posthuman condition because the passage can be equally interpreted as anything else, such as Shelley attempting to emulate the passive observations of an ordinary human newborn in their initial sensory experience of the world. Carretero-Gonzalez’s contention of moral superiority, in regards to his vegan diet as a moral choice (57), can also be refuted as a trait of the human or transhuman psyche rather than the posthuman by orchestrating with Cimatti’s contention that a “’post-human community’ is regulated neither by ethics nor by law” (24). Even setting aside hypothetical scenarios, ordinary humans can and do adopt vegan diets, thus his moral choice cannot be surmised as a trait that “sets [the creature] apart from the human species” (Carretero-Gonzalez 57).

Functional and ontological analyses solidly indicate that Frankenstein’s creature is transhuman rather than posthuman, yet misconception of his beyond-human condition still arises. Carretero-Gonzalez misidentifies the creature’s transhuman traits as that of a posthuman’s by hinging upon the wrong determinative factor, and, while Cimatti’s analysis largely adheres to the prevailing definition of a posthuman and determines the creature “too human” (10) to be fully posthuman, it appears that the abstract nature of the concept causes debatable interpretation of what constitutes posthuman behavior. This pattern of misconception is analogous of the misidentification in the novel due to the disparity between his inner and outer state of transcendence. The inner state delineated by how the creature performs and thinks is wholly transhuman; however, his visual appearance—outer state—implies posthuman attribute. When his transhumanist body and features are reanimated with life, thereby immortalizing mortal material and achieving instead an extent of posthuman condition, his appearance immediately becomes horrifying as opposed to the grandeur that Frankenstein had envisioned. This incongruence in mind and body causes the creature to be a being who is *“*at once both inside and outside society” (Cimatti 20), alienated from humans for appearing to be an unattractive and uncanny version of the human species but also striving to be like them because he is internally similar. This ultimately gives rise to his vindictive motivations as he states, “I am malicious because I am miserable” (Shelley 102) in reference to humans’ disgust towards him, thus beginning his murderous and vengeful rampage.

What the creature offers as a realized form of being beyond-human is that not even the transhuman may necessarily appear human, and acts as a good analogy for how the processes of developing the transhuman and posthuman may arise in reality with relevant challenges and consequences of identity labels. The tragic results of his misidentification raise concern for label-based ethics and show that the inner state of transcendence is significant to the survival of a being who has achieved outer transcendence. However, it is important to note that Frankenstein’s creature is limited as a reflection of a realized beyond-human being in that in our reality, the posthuman appearance might not necessarily assume a biological life form—as technological developments show today, virtual consciousness is a likely possibility (Sandu 13). Thus, not all interpretations derived from the novel can be applied to real life circumstances. The investigation of Frankenstein’s creature as a beyond-human shows a strong ontological grounding in human singularity based on having a physical body, which lends the further consideration of whether it is possible to have a fully posthuman being that simultaneously has a physical body to contain a posthuman psyche.

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