The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 3 | Issue 12 | December 2025
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online)
Website: www.theacademic.in

Posthumanism and the Failure of Humanism in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

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DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18220344

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 20-12-2025

Published: 10-01-2026

Keywords:

Posthumanism; Humanism; Mary Shelley; Frankenstein; Ethics of creation; Embodiment; Otherness

ABSTRACT

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818; rev. 1831) is often read as an origin text for science fiction, a Gothic warning against "playing God," or a Romantic critique of hubristic reason. This paper argues that the novel is also a remarkably early meditation on posthumanism—and, more specifically, on the failure of liberal humanism to recognize, protect, or ethically relate to forms of life that do not match its normative template. Drawing on critical posthumanism (Haraway; Hayles; Braidotti; Wolfe), this study reframes the Creature not as a failed human but as a posthuman subject whose claims to dignity expose the exclusions that underwrite "the human" as a moral category. The novel dramatizes how humanist ideals—autonomous agency, rational mastery, species superiority, and aesthetic normativity—collapse when confronted with a being who can speak, feel, reason, and suffer yet remains unrecognized due to embodiment, origin, and appearance. The Creature's education, narrative self-fashioning, and demand for relationality reveal an ethics grounded less in essence than in responsibility, care, and social recognition. Conversely, Victor's scientific ambition becomes an allegory for humanism's will-to-mastery: creation without kinship, knowledge without accountability, and freedom without obligation. Ultimately, Frankenstein suggests that the "monster" is not posthuman life but a humanist order that withholds sympathy and rights from the non-normative. By reading the novel

through posthuman theory, the paper shows how Shelley anticipates contemporary debates on moral personhood, biotechnological creation, embodied difference, and the ethics of making life in an age where the category "human" is increasingly unstable.

Introduction

Mary Shelley stands as one of the most influential literary figures of the Romantic period, not only for her imaginative power but also for her philosophical depth. Born in 1797 to the political philosopher William Godwin and the feminist thinker Mary Wollstonecraft, Shelley grew up in an intellectual environment shaped by debates on reason, progress, science, and human rights. These debates deeply influenced her writing. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Shelley did not celebrate Enlightenment ideals uncritically. Instead, she questioned their ethical limits, especially when knowledge and ambition operate without responsibility or care.

Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* in 1816–1817, a period marked by rapid scientific development and intense cultural anxiety about the power of human reason. Experiments in electricity, anatomy, and galvanism raised new questions about life, creation, and human control over nature. Shelley responded to these concerns not by rejecting science outright, but by asking what moral responsibilities accompany the act of creation. From its first publication in 1818, *Frankenstein* has resisted simple interpretation. While often described as a Gothic novel or a warning against scientific hubris, the text engages more deeply with questions of ethics, identity, and belonging.

At the center of the novel lies a fundamental problem: the instability of the category "human." Shelley presents a Creature who can speak eloquently, feel deeply, reason ethically, and desire social connection. Despite these qualities, society rejects him. His exclusion exposes a contradiction at the heart of humanism. Although humanism claims universal moral dignity, it repeatedly denies recognition to those who do not fit normative standards of appearance, origin, or embodiment. Shelley thus reveals that the humanist ideal of universality often functions through exclusion rather than inclusion.

Victor Frankenstein embodies this failure. He represents the Enlightenment humanist subject who values mastery, autonomy, and progress. Yet he refuses responsibility for the life he creates. His abandonment of the Creature shows how humanism can separate creation from care and knowledge from ethical obligation. Shelley does not portray Victor's failure as accidental. Instead, she presents it as a logical outcome of a worldview that prioritizes individual ambition over relational responsibility.

This paper argues that *Frankenstein* anticipates posthumanist critiques of human exceptionalism by exposing the ethical failure of liberal humanism. Through the Creature's suffering and Victor's moral blindness, Shelley challenges readers to reconsider what defines humanity. The novel ultimately suggests that ethical life must rest not on normativity or mastery, but on recognition, responsibility, and care across difference.

Liberal Humanism and Its Inherent Exclusions

Liberal humanism is built on the idea that all humans share a common moral essence grounded in reason, autonomy, and self-awareness. In theory, this framework promises equality and universal dignity. In practice, however, it has often operated selectively. Humanism has historically defined the "human" through narrow standards that privilege certain bodies, behaviors, and social identities while marginalizing others. Those who fall outside dominant norms—because of race, gender, class, or physical difference—frequently find themselves excluded from full moral recognition. Rather than functioning as a neutral or inclusive system, liberal humanism has repeatedly relied on boundaries that separate the fully human from those deemed lesser or abnormal (Butler 2004).

Mary Shelley stages this contradiction with striking clarity in *Frankenstein*. The Creature embodies many qualities that humanism claims to value. He learns language on his own, reflects on justice and suffering, feels compassion for others, and longs for social belonging. Yet none of these traits protect him from rejection. People respond to his appearance before they respond to his character. Villagers attack him without provocation, and Victor recoils from him in horror at the very moment of his creation. Shelley uses these scenes to show that moral judgment does not follow reason or empathy but visual conformity. Humanity, in this world, is something that must look right before it can be recognized as real (Gigante 2000).

This emphasis on appearance reveals a deeper flaw in humanist ethics. If moral worth depends on surface legibility, then universality becomes an illusion. Shelley suggests that humanism quietly relies on exclusion to maintain its authority. The Creature becomes monstrous not because he lacks humanity, but because society needs him to be monstrous in order to protect its own fragile definition of the human. The category "human" gains coherence only by casting someone else outside it, turning difference into danger and vulnerability into threat (Badmington 2000).

Victor Frankenstein represents the humanist subject pushed to its logical extreme. He believes in progress, knowledge, and individual brilliance. He trusts his intellect and dismisses limits, convinced that his intentions justify his actions. Yet Victor consistently refuses responsibility for the consequences of his work. Once he succeeds in creating life, he immediately abandons it. His commitment to autonomy allows him to separate achievement from care and innovation from obligation. Shelley presents this not as personal weakness, but as a structural failure of humanist thinking. When autonomy outweighs responsibility, ethical disengagement becomes not an accident but a habit (Mellor 1988).

Through Victor and the Creature, Shelley exposes how liberal humanism privileges independence over relation and mastery over care. The novel suggests that an ethical system built on such values cannot respond adequately to difference. Instead of expanding moral concern, humanism contracts it, protecting the familiar while excluding the unfamiliar. In this way, *Frankenstein* reveals that the real danger lies not in the existence of the Creature, but in a moral framework that cannot recognize humanity once it no longer looks the way it expects.

Posthumanism as an Interpretive Lens

Posthumanism provides a useful way to understand why humanism breaks down in *Frankenstein*. Instead of dismissing ethics, posthumanist thought questions the kind of subject humanism places at the center of moral life. Liberal humanism imagines the human as autonomous, self-contained, and superior to other forms of existence. Posthumanism challenges this image by showing that human identity is always shaped by bodies, technologies, environments, and relationships. Rather than viewing the self as independent and disembodied, posthumanism insists that agency is distributed and relational. In Shelley's novel, this insight clarifies why Victor's model of mastery fails. His belief in control and individual genius leaves no room for ethical responsibility once creation disrupts his expectations. Posthumanism helps us see that the problem is not science itself, but a view of humanity that separates knowledge from care and power from accountability (Hayles 1999).

Posthumanist ethics also shift attention from sovereignty to vulnerability. Instead of asking who qualifies as fully human, posthumanism asks how beings are connected and what responsibilities arise from those connections. This shift is especially important in *Frankenstein*, where the Creature exists in a state of radical dependence. He does not ask for domination or revenge at first; he asks for recognition, companionship, and protection from suffering. His exclusion reveals how traditional humanism

maintains its boundaries by denying ethical consideration to those who do not fit established categories. Posthumanist thinkers argue that the human has historically defined itself by casting animals, machines, and marginalized bodies as outside moral concern. Shelley anticipates this critique by showing how the Creature's rejection is not accidental but structural. Through this lens, *Frankenstein* emerges as an early exploration of posthuman ethical failure, where the refusal of relational responsibility leads directly to violence and loss (Wolfe 2010).

Victor Frankenstein and the Ethics of Creation

Victor Frankenstein represents the moral limits of liberal humanism when creation becomes detached from responsibility. He approaches science with confidence in his intellect and faith in progress. He believes knowledge grants authority and that ambition justifies risk. When he succeeds in creating life, however, he immediately withdraws from it. Victor does not fail because he lacks awareness of right and wrong. He fails because his ethical framework allows him to separate action from obligation. Shelley presents this separation as a consequence of humanist thinking that values autonomy over relational accountability (Mellor 1988).

Victor's response to the Creature reveals how deeply he misunderstands creation as an ethical act. He views the experiment as complete the moment life begins, as though creation ends at animation. This belief reflects a humanist fantasy of self-sufficiency, where the creator owes nothing once achievement is secured. Victor refuses to imagine care, guidance, or responsibility as part of his scientific role. Shelley contrasts this refusal with the Creature's vulnerability, emphasizing that life does not emerge as independent or self-governing. The novel insists that creation without care is not neutral but actively harmful (Merchant 1980).

The destruction of the female creature exposes the violence embedded in Victor's ethics. His fear does not center on moral consequences but on the loss of control. He imagines a future he cannot govern and responds by eliminating the possibility altogether. Shelley frames this act as a refusal of relational futures rather than a rational precaution. Victor chooses mastery over empathy and authority over responsibility. In doing so, he confirms that his vision of progress cannot accommodate shared existence or ethical uncertainty (Gilbert and Gubar 1979).

Victor's repeated isolation reinforces his ethical failure. He withholds truth, avoids responsibility, and prioritizes his own suffering over the harm he causes others. Shelley does not excuse these actions as

tragic inevitability. Instead, she presents them as the logical result of a worldview that treats knowledge as power rather than obligation. Victor's downfall illustrates that humanism, when stripped of relational ethics, produces not enlightenment but abandonment. The novel suggests that ethical creation requires more than intelligence or intention. It requires sustained responsibility for the lives one brings into being (Wolfe 2010).

Aesthetics, Abjection, and Moral Exclusion

Shelley shows that moral exclusion in *Frankenstein* operates first through appearance. The Creature faces rejection before he speaks or acts. People respond to what they see, not to who he is. His body unsettles them because it breaks familiar expectations of human form. Shelley uses these moments to reveal how easily ethical judgment collapses into visual reflex. Humanity, in this world, is granted through resemblance rather than reason. When difference becomes visible, sympathy retreats, and fear takes its place (Gigante 2000).

This reaction reflects a deeper social mechanism. Communities protect their sense of order by expelling what appears excessive, hybrid, or unfamiliar. The Creature's body disturbs boundaries between life and death, natural and artificial. Shelley presents this disturbance as intolerable to a society invested in clear divisions. Instead of questioning those divisions, characters reinforce them through violence and exclusion. The Creature becomes a symbol of what must be cast out so that the human community can feel secure. Shelley exposes how monstrosity is produced through rejection rather than inherent evil (Kristeva 1982).

Shelley also shows that this process of exclusion is ethical, not merely emotional. Once the Creature is marked as monstrous, his suffering loses moral weight. His pain does not register as something that demands response or care. This failure reveals how moral recognition depends on whose lives are considered worthy of concern. Shelley anticipates the idea that some lives are treated as less valuable or less grievable than others. The Creature's repeated losses demonstrate how exclusion strips a being of moral visibility long before any crime occurs (Butler 2004).

By giving the Creature a voice, Shelley forces readers to confront this injustice directly. The narrative challenges the reader to feel sympathy where characters refuse it. In doing so, Shelley shifts the ethical burden away from appearance and toward responsibility. She asks whether moral judgment should be based on fear or on attention to suffering. The novel suggests that an ethical system that relies on

exclusion cannot sustain justice. True moral recognition requires the courage to respond to difference without retreating into rejection (Levinas 1969).

Narrative, Voice, and Ethical Recognition

Shelley uses narrative structure to show how power shapes ethical recognition. The novel unfolds through layers of narration, moving from Walton to Victor and finally to the Creature. This structure controls who speaks, who listens, and whose experiences carry authority. The Creature's voice reaches the reader only after being filtered through Victor, which mirrors how marginalized figures often require permission to be heard. Shelley does not treat this mediation as neutral. Instead, she exposes how access to narrative voice determines whether suffering is acknowledged or ignored (Levine and Knoepflmacher 1979).

When the Creature finally speaks for himself, his language disrupts expectations. He does not sound monstrous. He sounds thoughtful, wounded, and reflective. His words force a confrontation between appearance and interiority. Shelley uses this contrast to challenge readers directly. If moral recognition depends on voice and testimony, then the Creature deserves ethical consideration. The problem is not his inability to speak but society's refusal to listen. Shelley suggests that injustice often persists not because voices are absent, but because dominant structures choose not to hear them (Spivak 1988).

Walton's role further sharpens this critique. He begins the novel driven by ambition similar to Victor's. He values discovery, personal glory, and endurance over safety and responsibility. Yet unlike Victor, Walton listens. He hears Victor's story and responds to the pleas of his crew. His decision to turn back marks a moment of ethical growth. Shelley presents this choice as an alternative to humanist obsession with conquest. Walton's willingness to prioritize others over ambition suggests that ethical responsibility begins with responsiveness, not mastery (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002).

Through narrative design, Shelley makes an ethical demand on the reader. The novel asks readers to occupy a position denied to most characters within the story. Readers hear the Creature fully and cannot claim ignorance of his suffering. Shelley thus transfers responsibility outward. Recognition becomes an ethical act, not a theoretical principle. By structuring the novel around mediated and contested voices, Shelley anticipates posthuman ethics that value listening, relational awareness, and accountability over authority or dominance (Wolfe 2010).

Conclusion

Frankenstein ultimately reveals that the most dangerous force in the novel is not scientific experimentation or artificial life, but the ethical limitations of liberal humanism itself. Shelley shows that a moral system built on autonomy, mastery, and normativity cannot respond adequately to difference. The Creature suffers not because he lacks humanity, but because humanist ethics refuse to recognize it once it appears in an unfamiliar form. Through repeated acts of rejection, Shelley exposes how claims of universality collapse when moral worth depends on resemblance rather than responsibility (Wolfe 2010).

Victor Frankenstein's downfall reinforces this critique. His tragedy does not arise from ignorance or malice, but from an ethical framework that allows him to separate creation from care. He values achievement over accountability and knowledge over obligation. Shelley presents this failure as structural rather than personal. Victor's actions demonstrate how humanism enables ethical disengagement by prioritizing individual ambition above relational responsibility. The novel insists that creation always carries ongoing ethical demands, especially when new forms of life depend on recognition and care (Mellor 1988).

The Creature's story offers a counter-ethic grounded in vulnerability and relation. His desire for companionship, justice, and belonging reflects an understanding of ethical life rooted in connection rather than dominance. Shelley does not idealize the Creature, but she makes clear that his violence emerges from sustained exclusion. By tracing monstrosity back to abandonment and neglect, the novel shifts blame away from posthuman life and toward the social systems that refuse responsibility for what they create (Butler 2004).

By anticipating posthuman critiques of human exceptionalism, *Frankenstein* remains strikingly relevant in contemporary debates about technology, ethics, and personhood. Shelley challenges readers to rethink what it means to be human in a world where life increasingly exceeds inherited categories. The novel ultimately argues for an ethics based not on mastery or purity, but on attentiveness, care, and responsibility across difference. In doing so, *Frankenstein* calls for a moral imagination capable of responding to the futures we continue to create (Braidotti 2013).

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