

The Romantic Colonial Hero: Criticisms of Romanticism and Colonialism in Mary Shelley's
Frankenstein

INTRODUCTION

Romanticism focuses, among other things, on the exploration of unexplored regions and the archetype of the solitary explorer. By valuing exploration in this way, the Romantics orientalize and idealize the New World to the detriment of the Indigenous peoples who live there. The hypocrisy of the Romantic period itself lies in the fact that the Romantic ideal is a natural man, one who is more like the stereotype of Indigenous people than it is like the definition of contemporary Europeans. Despite this, the Romantics believed that the way to civilize Indigenous peoples was through education. Why is it then that, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the Creature remains monstrous before and after education? The Creature's education, combined with the presentation of Frankenstein as Romantic hero, show Mary Shelley's critique of the Romantic period and its problematic orientalizing tendency. She evokes other works and myths that are directly related to colonialism, proving once again that she is, at least, critical of the colonial effort. I will argue that Mary Shelley's critique of romanticism in *Frankenstein* demonstrates her awareness of how colonial efforts, while coinciding in time with romanticism, vastly contradict, and are hypocritical to, Romanticism. As such, *Frankenstein* presents a deeply critical view of colonialism, and the Romantic ego which drives the colonial effort.

EARLY COLONIAL EFFORTS

Despite the fact that the Romantic idealization of nature did not yet exist, Michel de Montaigne was still able to recognize the deep hypocrisy of the European colonization of the Americas. Much as viewing the Creature as “savage” is central to Victor’s understanding of his creation in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, central to the European understanding of Indigenous peoples is the deeply racist idea that they are “savage barbarians.” Montaigne addresses the inherent hypocrisy of the idea that Indigenous cultures are barbaric, while European cultures are not, in his essay, “On Cannibalism.” Montaigne states that Indigenous peoples have “most natural and most useful properties and virtues, which [Europeans] have bastardized... by merely adapting [Indigenous cultures] to [their] corrupt tastes” (83). For Montaigne, the changes that Europeans have made to Indigenous culture are not general improvements, as they were viewed during the Romantic period, but rather a corruption of the latter’s more natural way of life. This idealized vision of the Indigenous way of life is in itself a racist stereotype, but the comparison is one that calls into question European superiority and is therefore important to examine. He discusses the way in which Europeans value material culture more than nature, writing that “It is not sensible that artifice should be revered more than Nature, our great and powerful Mother” (83). It is this artifice that causes Europeans to be barbaric for Montaigne, meaning that Indigenous cultures cannot be barbaric in comparison because they do not value the material to the same extent. He goes on to state that by choosing artifice (or the material) over Nature, Europeans “have smothered [Nature] entirely” (83). In this statement, Montaigne implies not only that Europeans are more barbaric than Indigenous people, but also that Indigenous societies are more natural precisely because they place less importance on material gain. He concludes the

essay with unconcealed sarcasm, stating: “Ah! But they wear no breeches...,” stating that although there are a multitude of differences between European and Indigenous cultures, the only actual difference is material (92). While Montaigne was writing long before the romantic period, he understands both the “savagery” of the European colonial effort and its hypocrisy.

While the believed lack of materialism, developed by comparing the vast differences between the two cultures, is a major difference between Indigenous and European society, Montaigne goes on to speak to the superiority of Indigenous cultures in a multitude of other ways. He states that they have “no words for treachery, lying, cheating, avarice, envy, backbiting or forgiveness,” unlike European society, emphasizing the ways in which a society with a deeper understanding of corruption must, in fact, be more corrupt (83). He then goes on to state that while they can be violent, it is not a behaviour that is engrained in them, but rather something that they have learned in their contact with Europeans. Montaigne describes the way that Indigenous cultures behave in war, stating that they treat their captives well and provide them with many comforts, later killing them swiftly. They do not believe in the torture of captives, or the use of slow and painful executions, but rather prefer to kill their captives swiftly when necessary (86). Conversely, the Portuguese torture their Indigenous captives extensively. They bury them partly in the ground, purposely leaving certain body parts exposed, and shoot them with arrows. Only after causing great injury and pain in this barbaric way do they hang their captives. After encountering this tactic, witnessing the merciless torture of their own peoples, Indigenous groups began to adopt this behaviour (86). Until they were exposed to the horrendous means of torture that the Portuguese used on their people, the Indigenous peoples of the Americas dealt with battle and war in what Europeans would consider an honourable and

merciful way. Again, Montaigne is engaged here in a form of racist caricature, but he uses this example to force the reader to confront the reality that the supposed 'savages' behave in a much less barbaric way than their European conquerors, and only after experiencing torture themselves do they begin to replicate it.

Finally, Montaigne considers the most "savage" behaviour that Indigenous cultures are falsely attributed with: the cannibalism of their enemies. Montaigne is operating under the belief that Indigenous cultures cannibalize their enemies after killing them as a ritualistic event (86). Montaigne accepts that this can be viewed as "savagery," but he states that "medical men do not flinch from using corpses in many ways, both internally and externally," in the name of medicine (87). Using medical men as an example, Montaigne's analysis could be used to implicate Victor Frankenstein himself as barbarous. Frankenstein's scientific pursuits (as well as the pursuits of medicine) defile and utilize the bodies of the deceased in much the same way as Indigenous cultures were believed to, however it is justified as necessary for the progression of science. Montaigne states that "we can indeed call [Indigenous people] barbarians by the rules of reason but not in comparison with ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarism" (87). Scientists in the pursuit of modern science commit horrendous acts of barbarism, but instead of being addressed as such or ignored it is celebrated as an enormous victory for European society. Moreover, Frankenstein's inability to accept the Creature as human is exactly the same inability of acceptance that the colonial forces felt towards the Indigenous peoples because of their "savagery." Montaigne makes his case for the savagery of European society very clear, outlining the ways in which supposedly "barbarous" Indigenous behaviours are nothing in comparison to the savages of Europe.

Montaigne's depiction of Indigenous cultures as "noble savages" is in itself harmful, and serves only the purposes of European thought. He "chooses to view the inhabitants of the New World as the 'double' of the European rather than as wild, sub-human creatures without form of culture" (Losse 518). However, in doing so he omits specific details about Indigenous culture that would "undercut [his] portrait of the superior virtue and moderation" of their culture, because his goal is not to improve treatment of Indigenous peoples, but rather the general improvement of European society (523). Despite the fact that the European culture Montaigne is writing about highly values materialism, he is still able to recognize the intense hypocrisy of the colonial effort. While the "savage" nature of colonialism is physically diminished before the romantic period, it is worth noting that many opposed it at this stage.

THE ROMANTIC APPROACH TO CIVILIZING

The Romantic ideal can be partly defined as viewing European society, as it exists, as corrupt, and nature as the key to unlocking the ideal form of man. The writer who is most responsible for bringing about the values of the Romantic period is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While Rousseau did contribute a lot to Romantic values, he also "continues to confuse our comprehension of Romanticism" as Morse Peckham states, in that his work is contradictory and plagued with racism (219). Among many things, Rousseau's *Basic Political Writings* discusses the problem of inequality in society. For Rousseau, inequality is not natural. He states that violence and domination "[are] precisely what [he] sees among [Europeans]" but that it cannot be seen among "savage men, to whom it would be difficult even how to explain what servitude and dominance are" (67). In pointing out that inequality does not exist in the more natural

society of the “savage men,” Rousseau is stating that European society is lesser than past societies. Rousseau goes on to state that “man and the world where we see them now” have become “evil... habituated to the ways of society” (68). For Rousseau, it is society that has degenerated humankind. Modern man has adopted “vanity and contempt... shame and envy” where before, when we were Natural men, we had none of these corruptions (73). While it makes sense for the Romantics to adopt Rousseau’s disdain for society and love of nature, it does not make sense for them to “civilize” Indigenous people using society as he blatantly states that society is what has corrupted man. While Rousseau does not believe that Europeans can return to their natural state, he does believe that they can move away from Modern man towards a more natural future. Rousseau resorts to the racist stereotype of Indigenous people that Montaigne perpetuates, viewing Indigenous cultures as undeveloped and therefore more innocent than Europeans. As such, Rousseau’s opinion is that the Romantics should not be trying to make Indigenous culture more European, but rather should be trying to make themselves more like this distinctly racist vision of Indigenous cultures.

As European culture changed through the centuries, the approach to colonialism also changed. In order to understand Mary Shelley’s critique of early nineteenth-century colonialism, it is necessary first to understand the colonial force of this specific time. The advent of Romanticism brought with it a turn away from rationalism, and a focus on individual emotions and “a return to nature” (Peckham 217). Within this frame, an emphasis was placed on the exploration of the natural world as a means to find one’s true identity, which led to “cultural alienation and social isolation” (218). This change in belief was at odds with the early colonial effort, which aimed to change Indigenous people by turning away from the natural world and

towards material society. For eighteenth century colonists, “‘civilization’ largely depended on an advocacy of the virtue of a sophisticated material culture” (Francis 52). While the Romantics valued nature and the turn inwards towards one’s nature, conversely colonialism aimed to convert Indigenous cultures, who valued nature, to the societal and educational norms of Western society. For this reason, the Romantic approach to colonialism had to change in order to keep with their understanding of nature as the ideal.

This change in colonialism led the Romantics to establish their colonial effort as a way of civilizing Indigenous culture through education, rather than decimating their societies entirely. Mark Francis describes precisely what nineteenth-century Europeans meant by civilizing Indigenous people. Francis states that “In one sense, ‘civilization,’ referred to human improvement in general,” meaning that to civilize the Indigenous peoples of North America was to aim to improve them as humans generally (58). The supposed civilization of Indigenous peoples that occurred throughout the centuries of colonialism “included a broad range of manners, moral refinement, and political wisdom that the ‘barbaric’ lacked” (59). To Europeans at the time, “the Indian did not live in an ordered way, nor did he possess the kind of manners that a proper education would have bestowed” (57). Therefore, in order for Indigenous people to be “civilized” to the standards of Europe, they had to be educated in the same manner that Europeans had been. The Romantics believe that by educating Indigenous people in Romantic thought, the latter would be able to appreciate the natural world around them better than if colonists had not intervened. The Romantics thus used education in Romantic thought as a rationale for their conquering of Indigenous peoples.

As Rousseau greatly influenced Romantics, it cannot be ignored that he believed European society was corrupt and had degraded humanity. The Romantics believed that by educating Indigenous people in Romantic thought they would be better able to appreciate the natural world around them. They believed that in doing this they were bettering the lives of the Indigenous people while simultaneously believing, as Rousseau states, that society is what degrades and corrupts humans generally. Francis addresses this in his article by exploring the writings of the European colonialists at the time. While the European colonial force claimed to believe they were bettering the Indigenous peoples of North America, they simultaneously recognized that it was impossible “to make a simple adjustment to one feature of a civilization without considering the whole,” and that “no one aspect of indigenous civilization could be modified or improved without change cascading through all its parts” (53). As such, colonists and academics acknowledged, however carelessly, that any amount of influence on the various Indigenous cultures would uncontrollably, and catastrophically impact the whole. This acknowledgement came during the Romantic period. They were aware that despite the attempt to educate Indigenous people, they would still be causing irreparable damage to their societal structure. Why, then, would the Romantics—who valued the natural world so completely—try to change a society that presents in the way that Rousseau idealizes when they themselves acknowledged that such change was wrong?

CHARACTERIZATION AND COLONIALISM

European society, as represented through the DeLaceys and Frankenstein himself, is unable to accept the Creature as human even after he is educated in Romantic thought. As such,

Shelley is stating that the colonial effort to civilize is not only hypocritical, but pointless because it is not successful in its aim to civilize through education. Just as Frankenstein is believed to be fully rational, so too is his Creature believed to be, in at least some respect, human. Alan Bewell explains that the problem with some readings of *Frankenstein* lies precisely in the fact that the Creature is treated as human, when in fact he is an entirely new species. Bewell states that Victor aims to achieve the “creation of a new form of human being that... will no longer be subject to the suffering, disease, and death” that are inevitable to all living things (328). Victor aims to create a human being that is superior to the rest of the human race, believing that “if [he] could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, [he] might in process of time ... renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption” (Shelley 81). Much “Like an animal breeder choosing the best from each variety of man, Victor hoped that this multiracial being... would improve on the original species,” and create the ideal human being within the values of the romantics (Bewell 329). His mission, though it is achieved, is not considered a success by Frankenstein. When he first brings life to his Creature, Victor states with horror that “[he] had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!” (Shelley 83). His exclamation of confusion betrays the “breathless horror and disgust” that he immediately feels towards his creation (84). While Victor’s goal was to create the ideal human, he is horrified by the Creature. This can be understood when regarding the Creature as uneducated when the Romantics idealize education as a means to understanding the natural world more profoundly. When he first lays eyes upon the being that he has created, it is a being that is wholly uneducated in European romantic thought; therefore, it follows that he cannot be the superior human that Victor had imagined.

While by Romantic, colonial ideologies it follows that the Creature would be monstrous to Victor before he is educated, it does not make sense for him to be monstrous after obtaining an education. When Victor first hears the Creature's struggle, the Creature states that "all the events of that period" when he was first created are "confused and indistinct in his memory" (120). The Creature's experience of the world from his first creation is indistinct because he had not yet learned how to understand it. Slowly, he begins to gain knowledge through experience, stating that he "discovered the cause" of fire and thus "busied [himself] in collecting a great quantity of wood" to burn (122). Similarly, when he discovers that the wind helps the fire to grow, he "[observed] this also, and contrived a fan out of branches" (123). During this period, when he is drawing only on his own experience for education, the Creature is the epitome of Rousseau's Natural man. This ideal is evident in the way in which the Creature acts, going out of his way to help the cottagers when he encounters them. While initially he steals food from the DeLaceys, "when [he] found that in doing this [he] inflicted pain on the cottagers, [he] abstained" (128). Despite it having a negative effect on his own chance for survival the Creature cannot harm those around him. He begins to teach himself how to speak by observing them, and soon can "imitate almost every word that [is] spoken" (134). Through this, the Creature is able to learn about the "discovery of the American Hemisphere," and upon learning about the conquering of the New World, he "[weeps]... over the hapless fate of its original inhabitants" showing that he is compassionate to the fate of the colonized people, and that he recognizes that the actions of the West are wrong (135). The Creature himself states that in this state of education he "[looks] upon crime as a distant evil" and views human society as a paradise which makes him want to be "an actor in the busy scene where so many admirable qualities were called forth and

displayed” (141). When the Creature is educated by experience and remains away from society, he has a truly intact moral compass.

The Creature is exposed to many types of education without incident, but it is when he is exposed to human society for the first time since being educated that he begins to fall in his morality. When the Creature decides to reveal himself to the cottagers as their friend, he believes that they could not “turn from their door one, however monstrous, who solicited their friendship” (144). Though the Creature recognizes his own physical deformity in comparison to the cottagers, he cannot believe that they would dislike him when they learn that he is the same as them in intellect. When he first encounters them, he is alone with the blind man who cannot see his deformities, and so the Creature is accepted as human. The old man states that “the hearts of men... are full of brotherly love and charity” and therefore will not reject the Creature, no matter how monstrous he may appear (147). However, when the family returns home to find him the Creature states that he cannot “describe their sorrow and consternation on beholding [him]” (147). The cottagers do not accept the Creature as human as he expected, instead the women “[faint] and ... [rush] out of the cottage” and the young man throws “him to the ground and [strikes him] violently with a stick” (148). Despite the fact that the Creature has been educated in Romantic European thought, he is still not accepted into human society. Similarly, when the Creature reencounters Frankenstein after being educated, Victor is “sickened,” feeling “horror and hatred” towards the being that he has brought into existence (158). The fact that the Creature remains monstrous to both the DeLacey family and Frankenstein himself, proves that the colonial effort cannot be successful because it does not address the racism and othering at the heart of European culture, and therefore can never be successful.

Frankenstein himself is an embodiment of the Romantic hero; as such, his flaws are a direct criticism of the Romantic colonial effort. In order to fully understand both Mary Shelley's critique of colonialism and of romanticism, we must first understand Frankenstein as a product of romantic ideas. Throughout *Frankenstein*, Victor's love of the natural world is emphasized. He states that when he was young he was engaged with the natural sciences, and "The natural phenomena that take place every day before our eyes did not escape [his] examinations" (69). Later in the novel when Frankenstein climbs the Alps he states that the sight "filled [him] with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul" and that "[his] heart, which was before sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy" (116-7). When Frankenstein is feeling dejected, it is the natural world that he turns to for comfort. Catherine Vedder states that Frankenstein is "trapped in a world of patriarchal values and self-absorbed romanticism," or, that he is fulfilling the mold of the romantic hero insofar as this hero is self-obsessed (2). Vedder writes that "Victor's love of the Alpine heights, of storms, and of sublime scenery in general is reiterated throughout the novel," forming another association between the scientist and the romantic sublimity of nature (16). This deep love is only one of many connections between Victor and the Romantics.

Another way that Frankenstein is similar to the Romantic hero is through his obsession with the sublime. Natural sublimity is the main inspiration and source of comfort for the Romantic hero in all strains of life. While it has already been established that Frankenstein is comforted by the sublime, what remains to be proven is that it is his inspiration. It is precisely the romantic sublime that leads Frankenstein to modern science and, in turn, the creation of the Creature. In the beginning of the novel, Frankenstein studies extensively the outdated sciences of Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus. He understands as he ages that they are

outdated, but “[cannot] entirely throw them aside” (Shelley 69-70). It is not until he witnesses a demonstration of the natural sublime that the science of the past is thrown from his mind. Victor “[beholds] a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, ... and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared” (70). He states that the tree “was not splintered by the shock, but entirely reduced to thin ribbands of wood,” and that he had “never beheld any thing so utterly destroyed” (70). This instance of natural power is the very definition of the sublime, something that is utterly beautiful and horrifying simultaneously. Frankenstein states that “This last stroke completed the overthrow” of the outdated scientists that he worshipped, turning him completely to the pursuit of modern science. Though he is working within the frame of scientific pursuit and rationality, Victor Frankenstein demonstrates many of the main values held by the Romantic hero.

The final aspect of the Romantic hero’s way of life that Victor embodies is his solitude. An inward turn, one away from society, is associated both with the scientist of the Enlightenment and the Romantic hero. At many, if not all, pivotal moments in the text, Victor requires solitude. He is alone for weeks on end, in the creation of both the Creature and in his attempted creation of a mate. This fulfills him, as the solitary or head scientist, however it is not the end of his solitude. When Victor climbs the Alps and encounters the Creature, he states that he must be alone, because “the presence of another would destroy the solitary grandeur of the scene” (116). This passage fulfills Frankenstein as the solitary explorer of the great natural world, a trope that is distinctly Romantic and proves that he is inhabiting the archetype of the romantic hero. It is significant, however, that Frankenstein is not alone when he reaches the summit of his exploration but rather is joined by the Creature. As the Creature himself represents the product of

Frankenstein's Romantic and colonial dream (as the perfect man) the fact that he ruins Victor's attempt to seek comfort in the natural world is a comment on the Romantic colonial effort. This exploration of the Alps is interrupted because it is not his space to claim for his enjoyment. His love of the natural world, obsession with natural sublimity, and turn away from society, all paint him as the picture of the Romantic hero, thus associating the Creature with the "others" of the Romantic exploration: the Indigenous people who have been displaced.

While the relationship between Frankenstein and the Creature emphasizes the colonial effort beyond a doubt, there are other less obvious connections to be explored. The character in Shelley's *Frankenstein* who seems both to embody the Romantic ideal and to be the antithesis of Victor Frankenstein is Henry Clerval. While Victor Frankenstein offers an outright critique of Romanticism, Henry Clerval is more subtly critiqued through his association with colonialism. Clerval values "chivalry and romance" and studies the themes extensively when they are children (67). When they are adults, Clerval looks upon the natural world with the awe and wonder that is characteristic of the Romantic poets. Victor describes Clerval as being "alive to every new scene; joyful when he saw the beauties of the setting sun, and more happy when he beheld it rise" during their travels together across Europe (165). Indeed, Clerval himself states that "This is what it is to live" after witnessing the wonders of the natural world, going on to state that he can now "enjoy existence!" (165). Clerval cherishes the natural world, and is constantly awestruck by the sublimity of nature. Just as he loves nature, Clerval is also driven to the life of an explorer, feeling the need to search for "something new, which again engages his attention, and which also he forsakes for other novelties," when he begins to become accustomed to it (171). Clerval embodies the ideal of the Romantic hero, something that Victor embodies as

well. In this way, he and Victor embody Romanticism as a whole. While Clerval represents the idealized, thrill seeking romantic, Victor represents the darker underbelly of the romantic movement.

Vedder separates the early romantic movement, represented by Coleridge, from the later, represented by Percy Shelley. For Vedder, Mary Shelley distinguishes between these two forms of Romanticism in *Frankenstein* through Henry and Victor respectively. She states that Clerval's appreciation of the natural world "[assimilates] him to the first generation of Romantics in their values" (15). In contrast, Victor displays only the "sublime and self-reflecting aspects of the romantic personality" (16). Victor is therefore associated, for Vedder, with the later generation of romantic poets. She explains that this is because Frankenstein, like "Percy Shelley... is an icon of romantic self-absorption" (9). Vedder argues that Shelley compares Clerval and Frankenstein in order to draw attention to the degradation of romantic values, stating that Frankenstein's "romanticism is the kind [Shelley] sees as destructive"(21). She goes on to state that in displaying this destruction, Shelley hopes the reader will "reject the selfish, destructive [romanticism] in favor of the kind represented by Clerval" (21). In this way, Vedder is arguing that Henry Clerval is a beacon of what the romantic movement should be, an unparalleled appreciation for the natural world combined with a deep seeded desire for exploration.

However, Vedder neglects to acknowledge the ways in which these supposed positive qualities of Romanticism are in themselves destructive. In stating that she believes Shelley is advocating for the Romanticism of the so-called "literary fathers," Vedder may miss the criticism of Romanticism as a whole (6). Clerval himself, though distinctly more likeable than Frankenstein, is destructive in his own way. Victor states that Clerval's principle interest lies in

the study of languages, and that in particular “Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew, gained his attention” (93). It is not a coincidence that Clerval’s interest in language directs him towards the East, but rather, as Fulford states, Henry “wishes to master the languages of India with the aim of materially assisting in the progress of colonialism and trade” (43). Clerval’s interest in learning the cultures of other countries, as well as his desire for exploration, expose him as someone who assists in the conquering of the East. Similarly, it cannot be ignored that Clerval is the Creature’s first true victim. When Frankenstein destroys the Creature’s last hope of camaraderie through the destruction of his mate, the Creature immediately kills Henry Clerval. Frankenstein is distraught as Clerval was his other half — the person who completed him insofar as he is an embodiment of Romanticism. In killing Clerval, the Creature is destroying the illusion of romanticism as a positive influence on the cultures of the world, as Clerval makes it seem, and reveals instead the romantic’s true purpose: the appropriation and control of other cultures. While Clerval and Victor are blinded by their own Romantic ideals, “The Creature is not carried away by his own Romanticism; he can reason, and can see himself becoming Satan” (Vedder 21). The Creature takes it upon himself to right the wrong that has been committed against him by human society, despite the fact that his actions make him evil in the eyes of the society he so desperately wanted to belong to.

ALLUSION AND COLONIALISM

Though the characterization in *Frankenstein* is essential to understanding Shelley’s critique, the allusions made throughout the novel are arguably more important. One of the many works referenced in *Frankenstein* is *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor

Coleridge. The poem expresses the guilt associated with colonialism; this allusion, therefore, cannot be ignored, as it shows Shelley herself is thinking about the colonial impact. The poem describes the voyage of the mariner and his crew as they participate in the European maritime expansion. However, this action curses the mariner and ends with the destruction of the entire crew, save himself. William Empson performs an in-depth analysis of Coleridge's poem. Empson states that the mariner is himself a physical embodiment of "the maritime expansion of the Western Europeans" (298). He goes on to describe the lingering sense of guilt that the poem presents, explaining that what the mariner is feeling is a kind of "neurotic guilt," stating that he is "struck down by guilt though by his own principles he [has] done no wrong" (313). Empson states that there is only one existing superstition about albatrosses, which is "that they were ships' captains who had been drowned passing the Cape of Good Hope" (304). In this way, the mariner has engaged in an act of cannibalism, a deep moral atrocity for European society. However, as Empson states, the mariner did not know that it was wrong when it occurred (304). While the mariner, much as the Europeans, is able to defend his colonial actions using his specific moral code, he is plagued with guilt that is the symptom of another innate moral code. Empson then applies this interpretation of the poem to the European maritime expansion which itself "reek[s] of guilt" (304). Empson states that "Columbus himself... lamented that the Caribbeans were so innocent, unsuspecting, and doomed," and that while the treatment of the indigenous peoples of the Americas was atrocious, they were able to defend it because "The explorers did not realise that the natives were human" (304). Because the explorers were working within a limited view of what it is to be human, they were able to rationally justify what they were doing to the Indigenous people by removing their humanity entirely. Therefore, in

Coleridge's poem, "it would not be right to say that the Albatross was a symbol of the ill-treated natives, but the terrible cry 'I didn't know it was wrong when I did it'" (305). The poem, though perhaps inadvertently, is an admission of the intense guilt felt by the Europeans due to their mass genocide of the extensive Indigenous cultures of the world.

In *Frankenstein*, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is both an expression of colonial guilt, and a metaphor for Frankenstein's life. The poem is first referenced in the preface to *Frankenstein*, in Walton's letter to his sister. Walton states that "[he] is going to unexplored regions, to 'the land of mist and snow,'" quoting a line from *The Mariner* (56). He then states that he "shall kill no albatross" and therefore Margaret does not need to be "alarmed for [his] safety" (56). Shelley's evocation of Coleridge's poem therefore cannot be ignored when reading *Frankenstein* through the lens of colonial guilt. It is significant that Walton and Victor, the physical embodiments of the scientific pursuit of knowledge, are the ones who quote the poem. However, as Catherine Vedder states, "Walton has misread Coleridge" and this misreading "is an ethical one" (3). Walton mistakenly believes that the poem's moral lesson is a literal one, and that he can avoid the fate of the mariner by avoiding the albatross. However, his exploration of the arctic is in itself a repetition of the voyage of the mariner, and of the countless European explorers before him who wrecked havoc on the supposedly 'undiscovered' world. Walton's reading of Coleridge's poem fails to grasp the symbolic meaning of the shooting of the albatross as "a displacement of a more general guilt experienced by the Western maritime nations for their treatment of other cultures" (Kitson 14). Instead, Walton "reads the poem as an exotic adventure narrative" (Vedder 6).

The Mariner is on Frankenstein's mind as well after he creates the Creature. Victor states that he "hurried on with irregular steps" as he fled the room of creation, "Like one who, on a lonely road, / Doth walk in fear and dread, / And, having once turn'd round, walks on, / and turns no more his head; / Because he knows a frightful fiend / Doth close behind him tread" (85).

Victor uses the supernatural language of *The Mariner* to describe the Creature that he has created using pure rationality. This emphasis on the supernatural undermines Victor's reasons turning the text to the gothic. Shelley makes another connection, this time between Victor and *The Mariner*, in order to further cement the association between Victor and *The Mariner* in the reader's mind. Frankenstein references *The Mariner* again when he is made aware of his father's wish for him to marry Elizabeth, stating that he could not "enter into a festival with this deadly weight yet hanging round [his] neck, and bowing [him] to the ground" (163). What weighs on him in this passage is his promise to create a mate for the Creature, but the image of this weight hanging from his neck is again a reference to *The Mariner* as the mariner himself wore the body of the Albatross around his neck. This passage symbolically links the Creature with the albatross, and Victor himself with the mariner. Victor misunderstands the poem in much the same way as Walton, evoking *The Mariner* after he abandons his Creature. However, the passage that he quotes is from the very end of the poem when the mariner is finally rescued from the ship by the hermit. Victor's statement that "a frightful fiend / Doth close behind him tread," is misplaced because it implies that his guilt and punishment are in fact behind him (85). What he does not seem to realize, however, is that his punishment is just beginning — and that it is the direct result of abandoning his creation, failing to recognize the humanity that he has created, that leads to his suffering. Victor commits the same error that both the mariner and the Western European's failed

to recognize, that the beings they have created and discovered are not another species but are, in fact, human. As such, Victor's curse has just begun. In abandoning the Creature, he has just committed the shooting of the albatross. Both Victor and Walton "are blind to their own motives even as they are blind to the ethical themes of the texts that they reference," and so they are unable to recognize themselves fulfilling the role of the mariner, leading them to their doom (Vedder 2). Shelley associates both Victor and Walton with the intense colonial guilt of Coleridge's poem, revealing them as colonial forces themselves.

Another major allusion in *Frankenstein*, as well as other works of the time, is Prometheus. The Promethean myth is evoked both in *Frankenstein*, and in Mary Shelley's other works. The subtitle to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, "The Modern Prometheus," is a reference to the Greek deity by the same name. The most common myth about Prometheus is that he stole fire from the Gods, by stealing one of Zeus's lightning bolts to give to humankind. As a result, Zeus chained him to the side of a mountain and his liver was eaten by crows every day for the rest of eternity. In another story about Prometheus, he is the one who created humankind, moulding them from earth and water. Though the myths differ in content, they both feature Prometheus as creator in one sense or another. While in the latter, Prometheus is the literal creator of humankind, in the former he is the creator of humans as we are known today. By titling *Frankenstein* as "The Modern Prometheus," Shelley is forming an association between the Greek deity and the protagonist of her novel, from which it gets its name, Victor Frankenstein.

The parallels between Frankenstein and Prometheus are many. Frankenstein's pursuit of the creation of human life is a direct theft from God, in exactly the same way that Prometheus is said to have stolen fire from Zeus. The sin, for both Prometheus and Frankenstein, is the

presumption that they can or should have the ability to understand and control the domain of the divine. In fact, it is the lightning bolt of Zeus which leads Frankenstein to attempt to create human life when he witnesses the destruction of the oak tree. In “[bestowing] animation upon lifeless matter,” Victor is committing an act of God and therefore is presuming himself to be Godlike (81). This presumption is a catastrophic mistake which the Creature himself confronts his creator for when he discovers that he intends to “extinguish the spark which [he] so negligently bestowed,” demanding of his creator: “How dare you sport thus with life?” (118). While the Creature has only been alive for a short period of time, he has more humanity than Victor in that he recognizes his mortality, when Frankenstein cannot. For Shelley, Frankenstein’s presumption that he can (or should) decide who lives and who dies is his ultimate mistake, or moral error. Finally, Frankenstein states that “[he is] a blasted tree; the bolt has entered [his] soul,” comparing his own destruction at the end of the novel to the destruction of the oak tree that begins his quest for scientific excellency (169). By stating that it is the lightning bolt that has destroyed him, Frankenstein is acknowledging that God is punishing him for his presumption using the very weapon that Prometheus stole from Zeus: the lightning bolt.

Prometheus’s story is not a theme that ends with *Frankenstein*, but rather is revisited frequently. Two years after the publication of *Frankenstein*, Percy Shelley republishes “Prometheus Unbound,” which “[stresses] the redemptive aspects of Prometheus’ soul mate Asia” (Fulford 43). In the poem, Percy Shelley “genders the East as female and represents it as a source of renewal,” for Prometheus and by extension the romantic poet (43). The Romantic tendency to portray both the East and the Americas in this redemptive light is what leads to the Romantic value of orientalism, as well as the exoticism of the Americas. Through descriptions of

the Americas as “an exotic and fertile paradise,” the Romantics are idealizing the natural aspects of the land (Kitson 32). The Romanticization of the natural wonders of the New World is a distinctly romantic trope, one that glosses over the fact that there were people who already depended upon these resources. By painting the Americas as a land that is undiscovered with pleasures that are ripe for the taking, the Romantics erase the original inhabitants from the narrative completely. As a result, “Romanticism educated the British in an ideology of empire,” which led them to believe that it was their duty to explore the world (Fulford 37). Coleridge himself once stated that colonialism is “an imperative duty on Great Britain,” and that to him “God seems to hold out his finger to [the empire] over the sea,” urging it to explore the world (4). Exploration is not the only thing that the romantics had an interest in, but rather their desire to explore was undeniably linked to “their desire to imagine — and rule — the exotic” (47). Anne K. Mellor states that this desire is distinctly male, as it represents “the human desire to be enslaved as well as to dominate,” traditionally represented through the female and male roles respectively, which is “at the heart of all sexual relationships” (150). For Percy Shelley and the rest of the romantics, their creative genius was dependent upon the imagining and appropriation of the beliefs and customs of other cultures. This dependency developed from the male need for domination in all aspects of life.

While Percy Shelley reduces the East to a land that exists solely for the renewal and pleasure of the European explorer, Mary Shelley takes a vastly different approach. Six years after the publication of Percy’s poem, Mary Shelley publishes another novel that deals with the Promethean myth. Shelley’s *The Last Man* follows the story of the human race as they try desperately to avoid extinction, leading to there being but one human survivor on earth. The

novel “deals with the total annihilation of the human race resulting from a plague emanating from the East,” which slowly kills everyone except for the last man, who the novel is named after (Fulford 45). The last human wanders the earth searching for “the heart of another like to [him],” wanting desperately to find another human being to share his experiences with (Shelley 230). Shelley’s experiment of what would happen if a human being was forced to live without the rest of humankind is a narrative retelling of the genocide of the Indigenous people of the Americas. Much in the same way as the last man lives in solitude, the destruction of “the varied parts of a culture or civilization” by the Europeans would have had the same effect on Indigenous people, leaving them without culture or people to relate to (Fulford 53). The fact that the disease comes from the East is not a coincidence, but rather is a consequence for the actions of the West in colonizing both the East and the New World. Much as the mariner is punished for his crime in Coleridge’s poem, Shelley’s Europeans are slowly and painfully destroyed by a plague that is the direct result of the colonization of the East. Shelley turns away from the orientaling impulse of the romantic poets, focusing instead on the consequences of this desire for exploration and domination. In doing so, she demonstrates how it is possible to write romantic works without relying on the appropriation and romanticization of colonialism.

CONCLUSION

In my analysis of the critiques of colonialism in *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley is not only critical of the colonial effort, but of the Romantic movement as a whole. The hypocrisy of European colonialism was a well discusses topic, as stated by Montaigne who draws attention to all of the ways in which Indigenous culture is superior to our own. Montaigne states that it is

deeply hypocritical for a society as corrupt as our own, to attempt to make any kind of improvement to another. This critique is furthered when the Romantic movement begins, as their ideal is, essentially, Indigenous cultures. The hypocrisy of the European attempt to change any aspect of Indigenous culture is thus furthered, as the Romantics were simultaneously trying to become closer to nature themselves. Shelley's critique of the Romantic colonial effort is evident in her treatment of the Creature. Despite the fact that the Creature is civilized through education, he is still monstrous to the humans around him. Furthermore, Victor himself, who represents the Romantic hero, becomes increasingly monstrous as the novel progresses. In contrast, while Henry Clerval seems to represent a more optimistic view of romanticism, he too is a problematic character in his desire to colonize the East himself. Finally, the works and myths that Shelley cites in her novel point again towards a critique of colonialism as they emphasize, above all else, the lingering colonial guilt felt by Europeans. When examining each of the aspects of the novel in this way, it is impossible to ignore the deep criticism of Romanticism, and colonialism by extension, that Shelley is making. In a world dominated by the orientalizing and idealizing voices of her male counterparts, Shelley stands apart precisely because of her refreshing and unique view of the deeply problematic society that she lives in.

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