

Race and Otherness

In *Frankenstein*, Shelley represents the monster not only as a grotesque figure, but also as a marginalized one. From the moment he comes to life, the monster's physical differences mark him as an "other," an opposite of the European ideals of beauty. Despite his attempts, the monster is unable to assimilate into the mainstream culture, becoming "other" because of his bodily characteristics.

In *Black Frankenstein*, Elizabeth Young makes an apt comparison between the novel and more modern racial politics, arguing for a parallel between the monster's treatment and contemporary versions of racism. It is, of course, the monster's appearance that terrifies Frankenstein at the first, as his initial reaction reveals: "His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of his muscles and arteries beneath...these luxuriances only form a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost the same colours as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips." The sense of panic and horror, both typical conventions of the Gothic, is achieved by representing someone who merely looks different—a stark contrast from novels like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Castle of Otranto*, in which the villains actually are formidable foes because they are evil.

On a more literal level, *Frankenstein* also "offers an oblique account of white anxiety in the face of slave rebellion" as the novel "presents a white protagonist who is haunted and undone by the rebellious monster whom he has created" (Young 21). As Young suggests, the monster does represent the threat of resistance against his own creator. But the argument is complicated by questions of whether the monster in *Frankenstein* is actually defined in terms of his race; although, he unquestionably is posed as the "other" in contrast to the white, European characters. In "Frankenstein's Monster and Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain," Harold Malchow contends that the monster's "dark and sinister" look echoes the "standard description of the black man in both the literature of the West Indies and that of West African exploration" (91). These sinister, dark qualities are very much a part of the monster's "otherness," and they—rather than lack of intellect or morality—are what bar him from society.

While Young frames her argument as a way to call attention to contemporary race issues, her case for the parallel also enables a reading of the novel as one that represents the hypocrisy of discrimination. In this sense, the novel's horror stems as much from readings of society as a flawed world that brings about its own destruction as one based on a grotesque, stock Gothic villain.

Works Cited:

Malchow, Harold L. "Frankenstein's Monster and Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain." *Past and Present* 139 (1993): 90-130.

Young, Elizabeth. *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor*. New York: New York UP, 2008.