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Tracing Themes of Transhumanism and
the Posthuman in Twenty-First Century
Rewritings of Mary Shelley's
Frankenstein

Jacob von Strokirch

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Supervisor: Monika Class

Abstract

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is one of the most famous works of fiction ever written and thus much has already been said about it. Recent criticism of the novel has identified the presence of transhumanist themes in Victor Frankenstein's quest to create a new superior species and defeat death. Several thought-provoking retellings of Shelley's story have been published since the formation of modern transhumanist theory, but no attempt has been made to track the transhumanist theme from the original work to its adaptations. Therefore, this essay aims to uncover what twists modern writers have given this aspect of *Frankenstein*, covering both Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2014) and Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019) as well as contemporary transhumanist theory in general. By analysing and comparing the two works through the frame of this theory as well as the original *Frankenstein*, this essay concludes that both Saadawi and Winterson offer a rejection of typical twentieth and twenty-first century transhumanism and instead embrace a different view - one of human evolution through unity.

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Introduction

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is one of those works which transcend their own genre - the classic horror story of a man hunted by a violent monster turned on its head. Victor Frankenstein's "daemon" is not inherently violent, but a gentle creature driven to violence and hatred for humanity through humanity's rejection of him. This subversion, and its philosophical implications, as well as Shelley's wonderful writing in general, made the novel a widespread success in its time and more than 200 years later the novel remains a literary classic. The novel also has a strong presence in certain scientific and philosophical circles - Nick Bostrom even hailed it as the fictional novel with the most "enduring impact on debates about human technological transformation" (*A History* 5). Bostrom is a supporter of the philosophy of transhumanism - the idea that humanity can and should push human evolution further and eventually even defeat death. It is through this lens I intend to examine Mary Shelley's novel as well as two of its contemporary "rewritings" - Ahmed Sadaawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*. Saadawi's novel transposes Victor Frankenstein's creation, a being made from human body parts, into the war-torn early 2000s Baghdad. Winterson takes a transhumanist perspective on ideas of gender and artificial intelligence, while also writing about Mary Shelley directly. These novels, both having been published within the last 15 years, have much more untapped potential for analysis than Mary Shelley's original *Frankenstein*.

Many of these current transhumanist ideas were anticipated by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*. Victor Frankenstein "pursues nature to her hiding places" with the goal to "break through" the bounds of life and death (Shelley, 63). Though not generally through Victor's methods, this defeat of death is encapsulated in the transhumanist goal of superlongevity. One must also remember, that though the resulting creation evokes only horror in its creator, Victor's original intent was to create a new beautiful species, of happy and excellent nature, which would bless him as its creator (Shelley 63, 67). This, in combination with the gigantic stature, strength and speed of the "daemon" brings to mind certain transhumanist ideas about the next step in evolution. The purpose of this essay is to trace this theme in Shelley's novel and answer the question of how it carries over to Winterson's and Saadawi's works.

I argue that although both “rewritings” adapt the theme of transhumanism in different ways, they both, in the end, reject it in its traditional sense. To prove this I will first dissect the philosophy of transhumanism and its prospective presence in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. I will then go on to show how this theme is expanded upon in the modern, hostile setting of 2005 Baghdad, with heavier antiimperialist themes, in Ahmed Sadaawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* – themes which are already subtly present in Shelley’s novel, as Victor’s “daemon” and the violence he inflicts upon Victor and his family can be seen as an allegory for the oppressed fighting back against subjugation. Next, I will move on to Jeanette Winterson’s *Frankissstein* and showcase how the theme of transhumanism evolves with newer ideas of artificial intelligence and gender affirming care. Finally, I will compare both contemporary works to each other to show that they both present similar ideas of an alternative transhumanist philosophy.

Transhumanism and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

What is Transhumanism?

Before it is possible to trace the themes Shelley presents in *Frankenstein*, which would later be identified as transhumanist, to modern reinterpretations of the story, one must first demonstrate the presence of these themes in the original novel. In turn, being able to even localise these themes in the first place hinges on an understanding of transhumanist theory and philosophy. This first subsection will therefore focus on presenting a brief history and overview of the field.

The term “transhumanism” was coined by evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley in his paper with the same name published in 1957. In this essay Huxley boldly asserts that it is “man’s responsibility and destiny” to realize its potential by bringing about the next step in human evolution (13), and he defines transhumanism as the belief that this is possible - that humanity can improve and transcend itself (17). Though Huxley’s writing can come off as a bit fanatical, and though the philosophy has evolved and adapted in the almost 70 years since, and though there are many different branches of thought, some of which will be discussed later, most transhumanists still more or less concur with this definition. Transhumanist commentator Alexander Thomas states that despite some factions disagreeing, the core pillars of the philosophy are often stated to be the strive for “superintelligence, superlongevity and superwellbeing” (Thomas). To be a modern transhumanist is to believe, like Huxley, in the possibility of further enhancement of humanity as a species.

The methods and goals of this enhancement are where opinions differ and this has resulted in the formation of several subgroups within the transhumanist movement. In her video lecture series, Francesca Ferrando explains that there are, for example, democratic and libertarian transhumanists. Both factions strive to achieve human enhancement through science and technology but while the democrats believe that these enhancements should be available to everyone, the libertarians reckon that letting the free market decide will drive research further (Ferrando, *What is TRANSHUMANISM?*). Another one of these subgroups call themselves extropians. This subgroup is particularly important, as Max More, one of the founders of this subgroup, is credited with writing the first modern definition of transhumanism (Bostrom, *A History* 12).

Max More became a central figure in the modern transhumanist movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s with his new brand of transhumanism which he called extropianism (Thomas). More sought to create a space where fellow thinkers could gather and discuss futuristic ideas, and so, in 1992, he and Tom Morrow founded The Extropy Institute which hosted conferences and online discussion forums for this very purpose (Bostrom, *A History* 11-12). The more influential project, however, might have been *The Extropy* mailing list that they started a year earlier, in 1991. This list attracted many people to the topic who would later become prominent figures within the movement, such as Nick Bostrom, to whom I will return later (Thomas). More also outlined the basis of his “brand” of transhumanism in a document he called *The Extropian Principles*. In this document, the seven pillars of extropianism are stated to be “Perpetual Progress, Self-Transformation, Political Optimism, Intelligent Technology, Open Society, Self Direction and Rational Thinking” (More, *The Extropian Principles*). Summarising these points: extropianism places large importance on human enhancement, just like transhumanism always has, but also pushes for human choice and the eventual posthuman state of humanity (More, *The Extropian Principles*).

This is where it is important to draw a line between transhuman and posthuman philosophy because since these two fields are often interlinked they are also often confounded. While the field of posthumanism stems from postmodernism, transhumanism is often said to have its roots in the humanism of the Enlightenment, with Max More even suggesting to exchange the Christian calendar for one where year zero is 1620 - the year Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum* was published (More, *True Transhumanism* 138), a foundational text often said to have started The Age of Enlightenment (Bostrom, *A History* 2). Further, while posthumanists are interested in deconstructing the human, transhumanists, as discussed, instead want to enhance the human. Posthumanism questions the idea of anthropocentrism - that

humans are the most important beings in the universe, while this idea is what transhumanism is built upon (Ferrando, *The MAIN DIFFERENCE*). In his original essay, Huxley even calls humanity the “managing director of [...] the business of evolution” and “an agent for the rest of the world” (Huxley 13). The main thing that these fields actually have in common is the concept of “the posthuman” which means viewing “the human” as an open notion (Ferrando, *What does “POSTHUMAN” mean?*). Yet even this is not clear-cut common ground because of how the different fields proceed with this open notion. The posthumanist idea of the posthuman is a way of looking at the world and “becoming posthuman” is simply the process of deconstructing previously held ideas (such as the anthropocentrism mentioned earlier). When a transhumanist discusses becoming posthuman they are instead likely talking very concretely about the future and concepts such as uploading your mind and freeing yourselves from a physical body (Ferrando, *What is TRANSHUMANISM? & What is POSTHUMANISM?*). This is the meaning of posthuman that will be used in this essay.

Returning to the extropians, it is important to state that not everyone was for the Extropy Institute being the new face of transhumanism. While it brought many people to the movement, it was not very respected in academic circles and was sometimes criticised for its seeming “cultishness”. In response to this, Nick Bostrom and David Pearce founded The World Transhumanist Association (WTA) in 1998 (Bostrom, *A History* 12). The foundational document of the WTA, *The Transhumanist Declaration*, is what this essay will base its understanding of modern transhumanism on. The declaration was worked on by over 20 authors, including both More and Morrow, and has been modified several times since its inception in 1998. It was also adopted in 2009 by Humanity+ (H+) (Baily, et al). H+ is the successor to the WTA and “the main platform to discuss transhumanist ideas” today (Ferrando, *What is TRANSHUMANISM?*). *The Transhumanist Declaration* explains that “humanity’s potential is still mostly unrealised” and that breakthroughs in science and technology have the possibility to valuably enhance our condition and well-being, which, among other things, includes overcoming aging. H+ therefore calls for the funding to bring about these breakthroughs. However, it also highlights the possible dangers of misusing this technology and urges caution. It states that though new research could bring prosperity, it could also “lead to the loss of most, or even all, of what we hold valuable” (Baily et al). This is the perfect springboard to get into Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, as Victor’s “mismanagement” of his creation is what eventually leads to his doom.

The Transhumanist in Victor Frankenstein

Much like the philosophy of transhumanism, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a product of the Enlightenment, and as a natural philosopher himself, Shelley's protagonist fits into this era of progress and rationality, though Victor's methods are seen as somewhat beyond the pale (Shelley 54). *Frankenstein* stands today as one of the most influential novels of all time, not only within the field of literature but also in science and technology. As mentioned in the introduction, Nick Bostrom, one of the founders of the WTA, wrote himself that in the realm of fiction, it is arguably the work that has had the most "enduring impact on debates about human technological transformation" (*A History* 5). It is not hard to see why, though some might only see the story as a warning against tampering with nature. Margarita Carretaro Gonzales claims that this view is reductive (54) and I agree with her. I believe there is much to be analysed about Victor and his beliefs and the lens of transhumanist philosophy seems very appropriate for the task. As established earlier, transhumanism revolves around overcoming our limits as a species - with a large focus on overcoming aging specifically. Transhumanists seek to extend human life spans and possibly live forever, effectively cheating death. This is also what Victor Frankenstein seeks in the first act of Shelley's novel (Riquelme & Goss 434).

As he later tells Walton, Victor is, already at a young age, interested in uncovering the mysteries of nature. Even before he discovers the secret of reanimation he is fantasising about the ability to "banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death" (Shelley 45) - a deeply transhuman goal. This eventually manifests, in his formative years, as a passion for the natural sciences (Shelley 44). Victor is then put through the agony of his mother's death before being rushed off to university life in Ingolstadt, leaving him cut off from his friends and remaining family (Shelley 51-53). The one friend he finds at the university is Waldman, a professor of chemistry, whose lectures plunges him deeper into the sciences and the idea of unfolding "the deepest mysteries of creation" (57-59). Like a transhumanist, Victor is especially fascinated with studying the human frame and the question of "whence [...] did the principle of life proceed?" (Shelley 60). It is this study that eventually leads him to the discovery of how to bring life to lifeless matter (Shelley 61).

When his research grants him this ability, Victor is first unsure what he should do with it. He considers first creating a smaller animal, then a being like himself, before finally arriving at the creation of what he later calls the "daemon" (Shelley 62-63). He seeks not to simply make another average human, but to improve upon it, or, as a transhumanist would say, enhance the human frame. That Victor views humans as in need of enhancement is not an exaggerated

claim since he describes us as “unfashioned creatures” (Shelley 34). In his struggle to break through the “ideal bounds” of life and death and “pursue nature to its hiding places”, he constructs a “being of gigantic stature” and selects its features to be beautiful (Shelley 63 & 67). Victor’s initial goal was to create something superior to man, and despite the “breathless horror and disgust” (Shelley 67) that fills his heart when looking upon his creation, I would argue that he succeeded.

One need not search long among the pages of *Frankenstein* before finding a description of the “daemon” possessing superhuman faculties. The very first time Walton sets his eyes upon him he describes him, like Victor, as having “the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic stature” (Shelley 29). This large frame clearly also translates into great strength as he is able to strangle both William and Elizabeth without difficulty (Shelley 165 & 226-227) as well as tear Felix, a grown man, limb from limb if he so desired (Shelley 155). In his encounters with the “daemon”, Victor also states that he moves “with greater speed than the flight of an eagle” (Shelley 177) and “with the swiftness of lightning” (Shelley 227). The pure durability of Victor’s creation is also demonstrated several times throughout the novel as he is able to withstand the ice caves of glaciers (Shelley 170) and recover from a gunshot wound without medical assistance (Shelley 162-163). The “daemon” himself even states that Victor “hast made me more powerful than thyself” (Shelley 117) and that he can consist upon a coarser diet and survive longer in extreme environments than humans (Shelley 139). In isolation, the resilience possessed by the “daemon” would be the envy of many a transhumanist. In his creation, Victor manages to realise his childhood dream to “render man invulnerable to any but a violent death” as the only thing that can kill him in the end is himself (Shelley 255). The enhancements Victor makes do not stop there, however, as there is another that could interest some transhumanists even more.

I would argue that the intelligence of Victor’s creature exceeds that of regular humans. When he is first made, the “daemon” essentially has the knowledge of a newborn baby, not even being able to speak (Shelley 68), yet through dedicated study he manages to teach himself French at an alarmingly quick rate. Observing the cottagers, he picks up words one by one and stitches them together in his mind (Shelley 131) so efficiently that the very first time he holds a conversation with another (the blind man) he is already very articulate (Shelley 153-154). He himself comments that he improves much quicker than Safie, who the cottagers are directly instructing (Shelley 138) and he is even able to read dense poetic texts such as *Paradise Lost* after only a few months’ study (Shelley 147). When he eventually confronts Victor in the mountains of Chamonix, only about two years have passed since his inception, yet he speaks

incredibly eloquently and beautifully, being able to convince Victor to make him a companion, despite confessing to the murder of his brother in the same breath (Shelley 170).

Going back to Thomas's writing, it would seem that Victor's "daemon" possesses, to some degree, at least two out of the three abilities transhumanists generally strive for - intelligence and longevity. The third, wellbeing, he very clearly does not possess as the whole novel revolves around his suffering. However, this is not a fault in his design, but rather in the reception of others. His creator cannot endure the sight of him (Shelley 67), his "protectors" furiously attack him (Shelley 155) and when he saves an innocent woman out of the goodness of his heart, his reward is a bullet (Shelley 162). This is not a new reading of *Frankenstein*. I would say the moral ambiguity of the actions of both Victor and his creation, is the main point Shelley wanted readers to consider. Nevertheless, I believe that Victor's creation truly had the potential to be posthuman.

The reason the word posthuman is used here is because despite being made up of human parts, the "daemon" himself is a different species, an observation made by Carretaro Gonzales in her essay "The Posthuman That Could Have Been; Mary Shelley's Creature" (55-56). Victor also states this directly himself:

"A new species would bless me as its creator and source [...] No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I shall deserve theirs" (Shelley 63)

Thus I ultimately agree with Mladen Jakovlević when he calls *Frankenstein* a "prophetic image of the posthuman" (169), as Victor almost constructs the posthuman Max More envisions we can become in *The Extropian Principles*. However, for something to be prophetic it has to predict something about the future, which is what the following sections will address, by dissecting how the transhumanist themes in Shelley's novel carry over to contemporary "rewritings".

Frankenstein in Frankenstein in Baghdad

Saadawi's Scientist and Creature

Before discussing *Frankenstein in Baghdad* it is important to bring up the reason for the quotation marks around the word "rewriting". In short, I argue that neither of the novels discussed in the latter half of this essay are actually rewritings per se. Both Saadawi's and Winterson's novels are clearly and intentionally derivative from Shelley's, yet neither simply

takes her story and transposes it to a modern setting. While Winterson does something more complex, which will be discussed later, Saadawi's story only really borrows the "monster" from Shelley. Saadawi himself said in an interview that he wasn't even directly inspired by *Frankenstein*: the novel, but rather "the vast cultural space that is called Frankenstein" (Saadawi, *Arablit*). This is unsurprising since, as Jasia Reichardt puts it, *Frankenstein* has "passed into general and universal mythology" (136). The dissection of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* will therefore, naturally, focus on Saadawi's version of Shelley's creature.

When first opening *Frankenstein in Baghdad* one is immediately met with a rather large departure from Mary Shelley's story. Saadawi opens his novel with a fictional military report regarding a "Tracking and Pursuit Department" set up in Baghdad through a coalition between Iraqi and American intelligence agencies. This report works to frame the coming story as information leaked from this department to an ominous figure called "the author", as well as to establish the setting of a chaotic post US-invasion Baghdad. What caught my attention, however, was the mention of the "astrologers and fortunetellers" employed at the department (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 1-3). This is an early hint at the novel's supernatural themes, which are presented very differently than in Shelley's story. While *Frankenstein* is a story of reanimation it always frames the creation of the "daemon" as a scientific achievement. *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, on the other hand, dabbles in psychic powers and spirits. This contrast can be viewed clearly when comparing the novels' two "creators".

Though his exploits do take a turn to the occult, Victor Frankenstein is a distinguished scientist who works tirelessly for many months to make his creature. Saadawi's "Hadi the junk dealer", on the other hand, somewhat stumbles upon it. Hadi is as far away from the intellectual Victor as one can come. As inferred by his title he trades "junk" for a living, buying old scrap and furniture, restoring it, then selling it off for a higher prize (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 25-26). He has no real residence, living in a "makeshift dwelling" attached to a senile old woman's house (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 10), and he is known around the area for spinning engaging but false tales about his life at the local coffee shop, to the point where even the heading for the chapter he narrates calls him "The Liar" (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 18-19). The only thing he has in common with Victor Frankenstein is that they both work to stitch together a body from various human parts, though whereas Victor is doing it for "science", Hadi admits to himself that his work doesn't "seem to make any sense" (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 26). In the end it is not even Hadi who reanimates the creation. This comes about through more ethereal methods.

The "Whatsitsname", as Hadi calls it, is made up of random body parts Hadi has picked up in the aftermath of different bombings - a problem which continues to plague the city

throughout the novel (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 26-27). Thus the “Whatsitsname” is made from the bodies of victims - innocents caught in the violence of the power struggles between the different militia groups present in post-invasion Iraq. It is another of these victims whose soul, as Saadawi puts it, “animates the Whatsitsname’s body” (Saadawi, *Baghdad* VI). In chapter 3, the reader follows the spirit of Hasib Mohamed Jaafar, a security guard who is killed in a terrorist attack against the hotel he works for (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 35), as he tries to find his corpse so he can be put to rest. However, as his body is completely destroyed in the explosion, he has nowhere to go (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 38). After being warned by other spirits that things will “end badly” if he doesn’t find a body, he resigns to enter a random corpse in a backyard, hoping that someone will soon come to give it a proper burial. However, as one might have guessed, this is no simple corpse but the “Whatsitsname” of Hadi’s creation, and instead of being put to rest, Hasib’s ghost brings it to life (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 39-40). In some sense, it is not even Hadi’s creation, as he never imagined it would ever awaken. While the “daemon” calls Victor his father (Shelley 160), the “Whatsitsname” simply refers to Hadi as “a conduit for the will of our Father in heaven” (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 142). The reason behind this phrasing will become increasingly clear in the following section.

A Different Kind of Posthuman

Being made from all these different victims and reanimated by the soul of another, the “Whatsitsname” decides to go on a quest of holy retribution. As “he” (this is the pronoun the characters in the book use to refer to the “Whatsitsname”) explains to his creator; he is “a composite of victims seeking to avenge their deaths” and he believes that “he was created to seek revenge on their behalf” (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 130). This quest is chronicled in chapter 10 where the “Whatsitsname”, much like Victor’s “daemon”, recounts his story to his creator. Right before this chapter the reader learns Saadawi’s twist upon Shelley’s creation - the decomposition of its body. The “Whatsitsname” explains that as he kills a perpetrator, the corresponding victim’s body part rots and falls off (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 134-135). Thus he needs to keep sowing on new body parts to continue his crusade. Fortunately for him, the violence of Baghdad ensures fresh victims every day (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 150-153).

He also does not have to do this himself as one startling difference between the “Whatsitsname” and the “daemon” is that the “Whatsitsname” is not rejected by humans. He is hunted by the authorities because his holy quest is, as Sinéad Murphy puts it, upsetting the “equilibrium of violence” established by the different warring factions (279), but he is

accepted, assisted, and even worshipped, by several citizens of Baghdad as they support his goals of justice and retribution for the innocents (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 144-147). They help him complete his “missions” and afterwards find new victims and stitch up his disintegrating body (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 146 & 151-152). One of these followers, someone the “Whatsitsname” refers to as “the young madman”, makes what I consider to be the most thought-provoking statement of the entire novel. He claims that since the Whatsitsname is made up of parts from all different ethnicities and social classes he is “the model citizen that the Iraqi state has failed to produce”. He is “the first true Iraqi citizen” (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 146-147).

This evokes ideas of a different kind of posthuman than Max More was directly envisioning - not one of singular superintelligence or superlongevity, but one capable of fostering deeper understanding and unity. In *The Transhumanist Declaration* it is stated that the wish of transhumanists is not simply to overcome aging, but also involuntary suffering (Baily et al). It is not a stretch to say that this would have to encompass the end of all large scale weaponized conflicts and wars around the globe. With Hadi’s creation, Sadaawi presents one possible way this could be done. Though Victor, in Shelley’s novel, fears a future where his ”daemon” repopulates and supplants humankind, perhaps the earth should be inherited by creatures like the “Whatsitsname”, free from the prejudices that plague humans? Max More actually argues in *The Extropian Principles* that humanity should “encourage our cultures to experiment and evolve”, “continually improve our personal relationships” and even “recognize the intertwining of our interests with those of others” and “seek to act for mutual benefit”. This is certainly not the primary mindset in the suffocating and violent setting of Saadawi’s novel, where the different warring factions kill not only each other, but also innocent bystanders, every day. This is what the “Whatsitsname” attempts to put a stop to, by exacting “the vengeance of the innocents” (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 143).

However, much like Victor’s scientific pursuits fails when he rejects his creation, the “Whatsitsname’s” holy quest for retribution is eventually corrupted. This might not come as a surprise as his quest was always based on violence - killing as a punishment for killing. This theme of revenge as a vicious cycle is also present in the original *Frankenstein*. As the “daemon” strangles little William he states that he has sworn “eternal revenge” towards Victor (Shelley 164), and after Victor goes back on his promise to create for him a female companion, he declares that he leaves him only one choice:

“You can blast my other passions, but revenge remains - revenge, henceforth dearer than light or food! I may die, but first you, my tyrant and tormentor, shall curse the sun that gazes on your misery.” (Shelley 196)

The “daemon” then goes on to murder both Henry Clerval (Shelley 205) and Elizabeth (Shelley 226-227), which in turn makes Victor seek revenge upon his creation - devoting what’s left of his life to his destruction (Shelley 231). In the end both revenge quests lead to the seekers’ further ruinations. Victor pursues his “daemon” to the end of the world only to perish in the cold of the arctic (Shelley 250) which predictably grants no joy to his destroyer, as “the daemon” himself admits. He tells Walton that he was built for love and sympathy, which makes killing innocents feel like torture and that “while I destroyed his hopes, I did not satisfy my own desires” (Shelley 252-253). While the “Whatsitsname’s” story plays out very differently, it also involves his murder of the innocents.

Revenge being a vicious cycle is particularly true in the case of the “Whatitsname” and his quest, since whenever he successfully completes a “mission” and avenges one of the victims, his body deteriorates. His assistants then stick on the body parts of new victims, making his quest, in theory, an endless one (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 153). There is also the problem of whose body parts to use. The “Whatsitsname” desires not the flesh of criminals, only victims, but, as one of his followers puts it; “Each of us has a measure of criminality” (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 156). As the “Whatsitsname” grows more wary of the “purity” of the flesh his followers bring him, he realises that the only way to ensure the flesh of victims is to make them victims himself, and so he kills an innocent man to take his eyes (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 161). Though the “Whatsitsname” tries to convince himself otherwise, he kills for his own self-interest and instead of putting an end to the violence in the city, he ends up perpetuating it. Like Victor’s goal of defeating death, the young madman’s posthuman vision of a true Iraqi citizen remains unfulfilled.

The failure of the “Whatsitsname” can also be read as a critique of the transhuman propaganda spread by the US government in the aftermath of the Iraq campaign. Drawing on Jennifer Terry’s concept of “biomedical salvation narratives”, Annie Webster asserts that *Frankenstein in Baghdad* questions the truism that medical advances can come from the horrors of war (439). Webster brings up how the American media publishes stories of veterans of the Iraq war restoring their bodies through experimental treatments and prosthetics, thus pushing this very truism (443). She argues that Saadawi, through the “Whatsitsname”, confronts readers with the Iraqi citizens who could not partake in these alleged medical advances (445) and

“exposes the futility of any narrative that justifies the destruction of many bodies through the salvation a single body” (459). This connects back to the idea of a different posthuman and once again casts Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* as a proponent for evolution through unity and not individual enhancement. After all, it is the lack of unity between creator and creature, between humanity and the new species, that sparks the main conflict in Shelley’s original novel.

Winterson’s *Frankissstein*: Artificial Intelligence and Non-Binarism

Jeanette Winterson and Mary Shelley

As stated earlier, I do not consider *Frankissstein* a mere rewriting of *Frankenstein*, though for very different reasons than with *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. While Saadawi claims that he was not directly influenced by Mary Shelley, it is unmistakable that Winterson was, as her fascination with Shelley and her novel can be found not only in *Frankissstein*, but in her other works. Roughly two years after writing *Frankissstein*, Winterson published *12 Bytes* - a collection of essays pondering past, present and future strides in science and technology. In the very first of these essays she claims that Mary Shelley predicted the coming of AI (which Winterson refers to as “alternative intelligence”) and calls *Frankenstein* a “message in a bottle” (20). The whole book works to recenter the narrative of progress and tell the often untold stories of the women at the forefront. Winterson asserts the importance of Mary Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, in this and calls her treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the “starting gun for feminism” (*12 Bytes* 49). Wollstonecraft argues for the importance of access to education for women, as women who wanted to learn mathematics or natural science at the time had to teach themselves. Winterson likens this to how Victor Frankenstein’s “daemon” has to teach himself, and states that this is no accident (*12 Bytes* 22). Reading both her novel and her essays, it thus becomes clear that Winterson considers Shelley to be an extremely important character in the history of, not only literature, but science and philosophy. It should therefore not come as a surprise that *Frankissstein* is as much a reframing of Shelley’s story as it is of Victor Frankenstein’s.

This is evident to the reader from the very first page as the first chapter of *Frankissstein* is narrated by Mary Shelley herself, during the summer of 1816 (1). Famously, this summer, which she spent at Lake Geneva with her stepsister Claire Clairmont as well as famous poets

Lord Byron, John William Polidori and her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 5), is the summer where Mary first conceptualised and wrote *Frankenstein*. The reader gets to follow this writing process and as well as the philosophical discussions between those staying at the lake. Winterson also writes about other moments in Mary's life, such as the birth of her children and the eventual death of Percy, but it is the story of the stay at Lake Geneva which is mirrored in Winterson's other interloping narrative, which is unfurling in the 21st century. This new story is thus influenced both by *Frankenstein* and the story of how it was written.

In the new story, Winterson has placed alternate, modern versions of the people present at Lake Geneva in 1816 and in the novel's second chapter, they all meet at a conference on Robotics in Memphis (*Frankissstein* 25). The narrator, Doctor Ry Shelley, is there to interview Ron Lord, owner of XXBots, a company that produces and sells advanced sex dolls, and the modern stand-in for Lord Byron (*Frankissstein* 36). Despite their very different occupations, both mirror images share a misogynist worldview. Lord Byron openly states that there is nothing to a woman's life except marriage, as well as "explains" how men are superior to women, calling his own daughter Ada "docile and passive" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 8). Ron, similarly, thinks little of real women as his focus lies in his oversexualised, empty-headed "girls" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 93). There is also the journalist Polly. D, who is implied to fall for Ry (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 332), much like Polidori is enamoured with Mary (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 5). The character of Claire Clairmont is translated to the evangelical receptionist Claire as well as Ron's first sexbot with the same name, which is fitting since it mirrors Byron's treatment of Claire Clairmont as a "disposable sexual object", as Susana Omega put it (99). There is more going on, however, with whom I consider to be the most interesting character, Professor Victor Stein. As Ry's love interest who eventually disappears, Stein is a version of Percy Bysshe Shelley, but as his name implies, he also contains qualities of Victor Frankenstein.

Artificial Intelligence, Immortality and Extinction

Stein is at the conference to host a lecture on artificial intelligence. In this lecture, he explains how humans used to evolve slowly, over the course of thousands of years, but that we are now on the precipice of a new world of AI, where life will be "fully self-designing" and "the physical limits of our bodies will be irrelevant" (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 72-73). If this sounds familiar, it is because he is citing deeply transhumanist ideas. Despite speaking at a Robotics

conference, Ry claims that Stein is not actually interested in Robotics, but “pure intelligence” (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 81). He views Robotics as a stepping stone for humanity to achieve its true goals, just like he views current human existence as a “stage on the way to being transhuman” (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 148). Unlike Mary Shelley, Winterson states the theme of transhumanism plainly. In *12 Bytes*, she even calls the “daemon” in Shelley’s novel a “transhuman creature” (114).

Much like his past counterpart Percy Bysshe Shelley, who ponders on the afterlife, claiming that his mind is immortal (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 16), so is Victor Stein obsessed with death, to the point where Ry states that “Death is where I met him”, referring to the “Alcor Life Extension Foundation”, where bodies are cryogenically frozen (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 100 & 103). This foundation exists in real life, and was, at the time of the publishing of *Frankissstein*, run by none other than extropian Max More, who actually appears in the novel to explain the workings of Alcor. According to Winterson’s Max, a frozen brain might be able to be restored to consciousness in the future (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 224), something Stein is considering for himself (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 109), since much like his other counterpart, he is also obsessed with defeating death. In a conversation with Ry, Victor claims that the way to cure the human condition is ending death (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 111), and he has ideas for how this could be done.

Another similarity between the two Victors is that they both work with human body parts, which Ry, as a doctor, supplies for Stein (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 86). At first, the reader is led to believe that these are only used to train artificial intelligence to diagnose humans (87), until Stein invites Ry to his secret laboratory, underneath the city of Manchester. Here it is revealed that Stein performs strange experiments on the body parts, inducing electrical currents into amputated hands to make them crawl around like spiders (169). This is very reminiscent of Giovanni Aldini’s 1803 experiments in which he used electricity to stimulate movement in human corpses. These demonstrations are often said to have directly inspired Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a connection Winterson makes in *12 Bytes* (111-112). Victor Stein’s next scheme is to give a new body to the frozen head of Jack Good - an old friend of his and a real person who worked on cracking the Enigma code in World War 2 (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 203). He wants to upload Jack’s brain to a computer (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 266).

The connection between the transfer to a “carbon based body” (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 266) as Victor Stein puts it, and Victor Frankenstein creating his “new species”

is not something Winterson is trying to hide. As Mary Shelley's novel still exists in this new story, Ry states:

“*Frankenstein* was a vision of how life might be created - the first non-human intelligence” (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 27)

Both Victors are attempting to command evolution - becoming posthuman and escaping death. Stein claims that through enhancements such as gene editing, humans can become like Gods, but the way to truly achieve “the human dream” is to be free from a body altogether (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 296) - in other words, becoming posthuman in the transhuman sense. He envisions this for his friend Jack, who has basically already passed away, and states that the next step would be to test the technology on the living - risking certain death for a chance at immortality. It is then heavily implied that Stein becomes this test subject himself, as he says goodbye to Ry and disappears (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 299 & 330-331). However, it is not clear if he achieves his dream or simply perishes in the attempt. After all, artificial intelligence is new technology, and its dangers are not to be minimised.

As stated earlier, *The Transhumanist Declaration* prophesizes new technology bringing “wonderful and worthwhile” enhancements to the human condition, while also warning about the dangers of these technologies being misused (Baily et al). In his book *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*, Nick Bostrom, coauthor of the declaration and cofounder of the WTA, discusses these dangers and possible ways to avoid them. Like Stein, Bostrom does not believe implants and cyborgs are the way forward, but “pure intelligence”, as Ry phrased it (Bostrom, *Superintelligence* 45). Specifically, Bostrom ponders the creation of a “superintelligence” - a mind which greatly exceeds the capacity of any human in “virtually all domains of interest” (Bostrom, *Superintelligence* 22). Such an intelligence could solve problems humans have proven incapable of solving, advance society at a rapid pace and make life better for everyone on the planet. However, since it will operate on an entirely different level of understanding to humans, it is impossible to know exactly what it will do, and thus its creators are met with the unenviable task of designing a system of morals for this Superintelligence - a system that does not allow for loopholes or shortcuts (Bostrom, *Superintelligence* 107-108). This is essentially an impossible task as it involves outsmarting the thing designed to not be outsmarted by humans, and even if a way to flawlessly communicate values to the Superintelligence is found, one still must decide which values should be communicated (Bostrom, *Superintelligence* 209). This has no easy answer as humans

tend to disagree on most things, and maybe our current society has some great moral failing that is yet unrevealed. Bostrom mentions how just a few centuries ago, slavery was widely accepted, and to avoid the superintelligence standing fast with outdated principles, we would want it to be continually updating itself. In the end, “we may not know what we truly want”. (Bostrom, *Superintelligence* 210-211).

Conclusively, Bostrom states that humanity is not ready for the challenge of creating a superintelligence and will not be for a long time (*Superintelligence* 259). It is like Jack Good himself put it: “Humankind’s latest brilliant invention might turn out to be our ‘last invention’” (Winterson, *12 Bytes* 80-81). Whether this is because the superintelligence will solve all of humanity’s problems by itself, or because it will cause its extinction, is impossible to know at this stage. Winterson writes that like Frankenstein’s “monster”, “true intelligence will be other”, and it is up to humanity if we turn it against ourselves (*12 Bytes* 36 & 202). Humanity+ was founded to educate the world to prevent this from happening, and Bostrom ultimately calls for collaboration (*Superintelligence* 249). Nevertheless, it might not be up to the governments and all peoples of the world, if an eccentric tech mogul like Victor Stein simply creates the next step in human evolution in his basement. Despite knowing that the “daemon” will keep tormenting him, Victor Frankenstein refuses to create for him a female companion, fearing havoc the two could wreak on the world together (Shelley 193-194). According to some biologists, this was actually a real concern as the two posthumans had the potential to drive the population of South America to extinction by themselves (Dominy & Yeakel, 109). Victor Frankenstein chooses not to, despite his own benefits, “inflict this curse upon everlasting generations” (Shelley 194), but who is to say everyone would make the same decision? “From the person-affecting standpoint”, as Bostrom puts it, it is beneficial to rush into the discoveries of new technologies as having superintelligence right now might prolong an individual’s life (*Superintelligence* 245-246). It is hard to say what one might do if one discovered the secrets to superintelligence. Would one wait to build it until safeguards have been put in place, or would one risk the extinction of the human race to save themselves or someone they love?

F*ck the Binary?

To finish up the section on *Frankissstein*, I would like to discuss another interesting angle of human evolution Winterson brings up - non-binarism. An important part of *Frankissstein* that I have failed to mention so far is the fact that Ry Shelley is nonbinary. They were assigned female at birth, but have undergone gender affirming top-surgery as well as taken testosterone

to appear more manly (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 118 & 120), and now identify as a hybrid, both male and female (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 83 & 122). In fact, this is the main reason transhumanist Victor Stein is attracted to Ry, as they have already managed to “enhance” their own body:

“Weren’t we just saying that in the future we will be able to choose our own bodies? And to change them? Think of yourself as future-early” - Victor Stein (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 119).

Ry is comfortable in their own body because they “had it made” for themselves, and Stein finds this both interesting and erotic, calling Ry “delicious new data” (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 122 & 123). His goal with his experiment towards the end of the book is to transfer to a digital body, but he feels Ry has already made the transfer in their own way, as he dubs them a “carbon-based human in a silicon world” (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 299).

In other places, Stein also argues that the binary system of sex will become outdated. In his lecture, which takes place earlier in the book than his meeting with Ry but later chronologically, he proposes that the new world of AI will be a world without labels and without binaries like male and female (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 79). He states later that he wishes to put an end to things like race, faith, gender and sexuality as these things make him impatient. “We need to move forward, and faster”, he says (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 199). It is reasonable that Stein would find these labels irrelevant as he himself wants to become a digital mind. As Ry asks: “What happens to labels when there is no biology?” (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 311).

This idea is clearly something that interest Winterson herself, as one of the essays from *12 Bytes*, aptly titled “Fuck the Binary”, also grapples with it - specifically the question of whether AI will change or reinforce the binary system of sex (159). According to Winterson, this system is a poor way of describing ourselves and she claims that “We can’t move into the next phase of our human evolutionary journey [...] and bring the binary with us” (*12 Bytes* 170). Nonetheless, she is scared that the people who program the future AIs will pass their biases onto it, since, as she states, “humans seem to be addicted to stereotypes of gender and race” (*12 Bytes* 161) - a claim I agree with since papers about *Frankissstein* still get Ry’s identity wrong, often defaulting to calling them a man (Ciompi 167). Winterson’s fear is not irrational either as current computer algorithms for delivering ads or sorting through resumes have shown, since they are trained through pattern recognition to reinforce institutionalised

conventions, something Winterson brings up both in her essay (160) and in *Frankissstein* (76). Therefore, she hopes that a future AI will be able to read “data sets as stories - instead of reading them as science” and thus correct human fallacies for itself (*12 Bytes* 169). This is also what Victor Stein advocates since this is how he finishes his lecture on AI:

“Even if, even if the first superintelligence is the worst possible iteration of what you might call the white male autistic default programme, the first upgrade by the intelligence itself will begin to correct such errors. And why? Because we humans will only programme the future once. After that, the intelligence we create will manage itself. And us. Thank you” (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 80, original emphasis).

Saadawi, Winterson and the Modern Frankenstein

This section will focus on comparing the different modern “rewritings” of Shelley’s novel and through this, see what conclusions can be drawn about *Frankenstein* in the modern age.

Decomposing and Water Soluble Fiction

Despite the multiple levels of narration (Walton, Victor, the Creature) in Shelley’s original novel, the story of Victor Frankenstein still follows conventional narrative structure. Once Victor starts telling his story everything follows in mostly chronological order. When Victor and his “daemon” reunite, the reader is of course introduced to a new perspective, but there is still little doubt around the actual plot and events of the novel. Both *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and *Frankissstein* diverge from this in different ways.

The narration in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* follows several characters throughout the different chapters, all with their own viewpoints and opinions of the events around them, while also jumping back and forth chronologically, sometimes making it unclear what is actually happening. For one example, “The Madwoman”, Elishva, from the first chapter believes that her son Daniel, who went missing in the war, is still alive and she believes this because of her “conversations” with a painting of St. George (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 7-8). Many around her, as the title of her chapter suggests, think her mad, though others believe she has magical powers which prevent her building from being targeted by bombings (9-10). The novel also states that her son actually does come home, before revealing that it is not Daniel, but his nephew, effectively tricking the reader (234 & 237). This event also convinces Elishva to leave the

dangers of Baghdad, and the moment she does her building is destroyed, convincing even some doubters of her “secret powers” (234). The presence in the novel of magical things like the “Whatsitsname” makes even the reader unsure of what to believe.

The “Whatsitsname” itself is the main point of contention, as we learn of him from known liar Hadi. He is also not listed as a character, despite taking up a large role in the story and many less significant people being included (Saadawi, *Baghdad* VI). Even Ali Baher al-Saidi, who publishes a piece on the creature, does not believe he actually exists, and seemingly just wants publicity (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 160). Despite this, the actions the “Whatsitsname” takes credit for have real consequences. The “Tracking and Pursuit Department” from the introduction are searching for “the criminal” and believe that he is “no fantasy” at all (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 160). All of this culminates in a final bombing at the end of the book, which seemingly catches both Hadi and the “Whatsitsname” in the blast (Saadawi, *Baghdad* 245-248). When Hadi later wakes up in the hospital, he is horrified to look in the mirror and see “the face of the Whatsitsname” - someone even he had convinced himself, at that point, was a figment of his imagination (267). This leads the reader to wonder if Hadi was somehow the “Whatsitsname” all along and just distancing himself from his actions through his false stories.

Dominic Davies has an interesting theory about this story structure and how it fits into an overarching theme of Saadawi’s novel. Davies likens the decomposing of bodies in the novel, both in the dead and the “undead”, to the state of the city of Baghdad (924). The constant bombings tearing the city apart and the different occupying factions taking over different parts makes the city like the “Whatsitsname” in a sense. Davies also links this decomposition to the crumbling narrative which is falling apart at the seams because of all the rumours, lies and unreliable narrators (924). Whether or not this simile was intended by Saadawi is unclear, but Winterson’s novel has a very similar narrative mechanic.

As stated earlier, the narration in *Frankissstein* switches back and forth between Mary and Ry Shelley, but even within Ry’s story, like in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the events are not always chronological. It seems more to follow a thought process, like when Ry thinking about Victor during an interview with Polly D is followed by a chapter on them meeting for the first time, despite this happening earlier in their life (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 99-100). The inclusion of real people like Max More, Jack Good and, of course, Mary Shelley also works to confuse the reader and make them wonder how much of this actually happened. What makes it even more confusing is when Victor Frankenstein himself shows up in Mary Shelley’s story, cursing her for creating him like his creature did him in turn (214). All of this ties back to the very first words in the first chapter: “Reality is water soluble” (1). This idea resurfaces again

in the novel as several other chapters start with a statement about reality. With *Frankissstein*, Winterson is playing with reality itself to tell a fascinating and thought provoking story. In the author's notes, Winterson writes herself that her story is "an invention that sits inside another invention - reality itself" (*Frankissstein* 247). This scrambling of classic narrative structure that both authors utilise could be seen as a metaphor for the confused and fractured state of humanity in the present day. *Frankissstein's* "soluble reality" works to show how human conception is open to be molded to one's desires while *Frankenstein in Baghdad's* narrators represent the unreliability of human nature. Through these structural choices, Saadawi and Winterson are subtly aligning themselves with Bostrom when he states that humanity is not ready for "the next step in human evolution".

Humanity and Rejecting Transhumanism

Despite both works drawing on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and both keeping with and developing the theme of transhumanism, they both eventually end up rejecting its ideas, at least to the extent of a single scientist creating something new in his laboratory, potentially dooming humanity through the struggle to "defeat death" or "bring about the next step in human evolution". The failure of the "Whatsitsname" and his holy mission reflects how many innocent people may have to die for a single person to gain immortality, which Saadawi likens to the "biomedical salvation" brought to American veterans at the cost of countless Iraqi lives. The "Whatitsname" could potentially have brought about unity as "the first true Iraqi citizen", knowing no race, religion or ethnicity, but instead got caught up in the worship of himself and his quest.

Similarly, despite speaking of Ry as already evolved, Victor Stein deems them as lacking courage or ambition when they state they don't want eternal life. Ry has designed their body for themselves through gender affirming surgery but Stein cannot understand not desiring to become posthuman (Winterson, *Frankissstein* 281-282). Thus the story concludes with him "transcending" or dying and leaving Ry by themselves - alone like Frankenstein's "daemon". Instead of this selfish struggle for immortality, Winterson presents another form of transcension - to a world without prejudices and restrictive binaries - becoming posthuman in the moral posthumanist sense. Like Saadawi, Winterson argues for evolution through unity. This is not surprising, as what actually drew me to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the first place was not the science, but the deep connection I felt with the story of a creature who was not really human.

Conclusion

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is one of the most famous works of fiction ever published and the story of Victor Frankenstein trying to defeat death has inspired many. In this essay I have discussed transhumanist philosophy and identified the transhumanist theme in Shelley's novel. This theme was expanded upon by Saadawi and Winterson in different ways in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and *Frankissstein* respectively. Though both present interesting ideas of where humanity could go next, they both also reject transhumanism in its original, Victor Frankenstein-sense. They both agree that the next step is to free ourselves from prejudice and conflict, not make any single person immortal. Shelley makes this point too, since the tragedy of *Frankenstein* stems from Victor's refusal to accept his creation.

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