

## Unnatural Acts: Environmental Ethics and the Repression of Nature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Farida Varis Khan

Scholar, Sandip University

Dr. Mohini Gurav

Associate Professor & Head Dept. of English and Languages  
Sandip University, Nashik (Maharashtra)

### Abstract

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is much more than a "monster story." It is a deep meditation on humanity's uneasy relationship with the natural world and the limits of ethical interventions into it. This paper explores *Frankenstein* in the context of environmental ethics and ecocriticism, and particularly how Victor's unnatural behavior works as a violent suppression of nature and its original order. Shelley's story makes an early but surprisingly prophetic attack on the anthropocentric view of nature as not a living, moral order but a resource to be subjugated, dissected, and exploited. Victor's mimicking of life with the help of artificial means, circumventing the organic and generative ways of nature, is emblematic of a more general Enlightenment attitude, one which highly regards control, mastery, and scientific subjugation. Creation of life through artificial means, bypassing the organic and reproductive processes of nature, is also representative of a general Enlightenment attitude, which prioritizes control, mastery, and scientific domination over reverence, restraint, and respect for natural balance. This is no mere individual achievement, but an entire cultural worldview that demands that the natural processes of nature be emancipated and rendered subservient to human volitions. As the novel advances, nature acts as a silent observer and agent of ethical culpability. The novel thus articulates a complex transformation in which the world becomes simultaneously a site of moral good and evil, wonder and horror, and the divine desire to humiliate and punish human arrogance. The sublime landscapes of the Alps, the forests of Ingolstadt, and the icy Arctic are desolate, unforgiving terrains. For not only do they present the reader with the external states that indicate Victor's inner torment, they are also signals of nature's ethical resistance to human overreach. Shelley's nature in *Frankenstein* presents an implicit nature ethic: a critique of the exploitation of natural forces and a warning about the moral and existential concern of separating from the natural.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, nature, ecoethics, violations, desolation, domination

### Introduction

Mary Shelley's novel '*Frankenstein*' has fascinated readers for over two centuries. Often remembered for its terrifying creature and themes of scientific ambition, the novel has been read through various lenses. Gothic horror, science fiction, Romanticism, and feminist critique. However, beyond the chilling tale of a man who dares to play God, *Frankenstein* holds something even more urgent and timeless: a deep concern for the natural world and the consequences of turning against it. At its heart, Shelley's novel can also be read as a powerful ecological narrative one that speaks to our modern anxieties about the environment, climate change, and humanity's troubled relationship with nature. In today's world, where environmental degradation and ecological collapse are no longer distant possibilities but present realities, it becomes essential to revisit classic literature with fresh eyes. *Frankenstein*, written in 1818 during a time of scientific discovery and industrial expansion, it captures the beginnings of this rupture between humans and nature. Victor Frankenstein's obsessive pursuit of knowledge and his desire to control life itself may reflect early 19th-century scientific curiosity, but it also foreshadows the dangerous mindset that sees nature not as something to live with, but something to conquer and control. Rather than appreciating the natural world as a source of balance, beauty, and wisdom, Victor treats it as a tool to be manipulated. In doing so, he not only disrupts the natural order but also silences its voice. The result of his actions is not glory or enlightenment, but sorrow, isolation, and destruction.

As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that nature itself begins to respond through storms, desolate landscapes, and the haunting silence of the Arctic wilderness. These moments in the novel show that nature is not passive or indifferent. It reacts. It reflects the emotional and moral collapse caused by Victor's "unnatural" acts. Ecocriticism and Environmental ethics are different areas of thought that help us see literature in connection with the natural world. Ecocriticism asks how nature is portrayed in a text, how humans interact with it, and what that says about our values. Environmental ethics, on the other hand, goes a step further; it questions how we should behave toward nature. Should we dominate it? Protect it? Respect it as an equal force? When we apply these perspectives to *Frankenstein*, we find that Shelley was not merely penning a tale about a scientist and his monster. She was also asking questions about what happens when human beings abandon their reverence for the natural world when they seek to silence it, reshape it, or drive it to its limitations. The scientist's decline and the monster's torment both reveal a world in which nature has grown cold and ruthless after being overlooked and violated.

## 2. Victor's Scientific Hubris and the Repression of Nature

*Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* is an 1818 Gothic novel by English author Mary Shelley, which recounts the story of Victor Frankenstein, a young overall who becomes obsessed with the idea of bringing life into a dead creature. Inspired by his moxie, Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods, Victor decides to create an immortal being and uses his insight and understanding to reanimate a body made of dismembered human remains. Built from old body parts and unusual chemicals, the monster created by Victor Frankenstein is animated by an unidentified spark. He walks eight feet tall and incredibly strong, but with newborn mentality. Confused and abandoned by his artist, he attempts to fit in with society only to be shunned everywhere. When he looks in the mirror, he sees his physical grotesqueness a feature of his character that hides society from his originally mild, compassionate demeanour. Killing Victor's younger brother, he seeks retribution on his creator. The monster kills Victor's best friend first then his new wife after Victor ruins his work on the female monster meant to alleviate the monster's loneliness.

Although Victor harbours pure hate for his creation, the monster reveals he is not a merely bad creature. The superb sensitivity and kindness of the monster, as Victor eloquently describes events, reveals He saves a girl from drowning and helps a group of underprivileged peasants, but his appearance causes him to be rewarded just with beatings and disgust. The monster, caught between vengefulness and compassion, ends up tormented by guilt. Even the death of his creator-turned-would-be-destroyer provides only mixed relief: happiness because Victor has brought him so much suffering. However, Victor is disgusted by the monstrosity's appearance and abandons it after he is brought to life. Rejected and left to survive on his own, the Creature wanders throughout the wilderness studying morality, language, and human behaviour from a distance. His appearance causes him to be constantly rejected and subjected to mistreatment from people despite his rising intelligence and need of company. This treatment hardens him and causes him to become resentful of his creator for providing life but denying him love and belonging.

Victor tells how in 'his secret toil' among 'the unhallowed damps of the grave' he 'pursued nature to her hiding places'. He 'tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay'. He collects materials for his new being from 'the dissecting room and the slaughter house' (p.55), which would argue that his Creature is not fully human but a hybrid of human and animal parts. The context of the novel would certainly argue that what Victor does is unnatural and a crime against nature..." (page 351). The tale turns into a sad hunt between Victor and the Creature. Victor swears retribution after the Creature murders numerous of his loved ones, including his brother William, friend Henry Clerval, and bride Elizabeth. "Victor Frankenstein is a mythic overreacher who transgresses the boundaries of nature, who invades the female body, and who attempts to usurp the procreative function of the female." Mellor, p. 222

Victor is chasing the Creature across the frigid Arctic near the end of the book, where he finally dies. Approaching Victor's lifeless body, the Creature shows great guilt and grief. He tells Captain Robert Walton, the explorer listening to Victor's account, that he intends to take his own life and vanishes into the cold wilderness. Wawrzinek (2008) States that Shelley incorporates every aspect of the romantic category which is associated with the physical force of nature to portray the sublime object that inspires delight, pleasure, awe, and terror.

### 3. Nature as Sublime, Witness, and Avenger

Mary Shelley transforms nature in *Frankenstein* into a strong and morally charged presence rather than only a background. Apart from their absolutely stunning beauty, the settings Victor Frankenstein visits—from the serene Swiss Alps to the frigid Arctic and dark forests have moral and emotional meaning. From an eco-Gothic point of view, these places reflect both transcendence and terror and present chances for introspection and vengeance. Saying, “These sublime and magnificent scenes afforded me the greatest consolation that I was capable of receiving,” Victor notes that the Alps especially are a refuge for him (Shelley, ch. 10). The natural surroundings momentarily ease his suffering; they also enable him to get humility and balance. “The sublime landscape... dramatizes the smallness of the human and the greatness of the non-human world.” (Garrard, p. 69) This concept directly supports readings of *Frankenstein* whereby nature is seen as supreme, morally charged, and more powerful than mankind. Victor often seeks solace or atonement in the grandeur of the Alps or the expanse of the Arctic, but finally these settings also help him to humble him and reflect his alienation. Too often framed in these great settings emerging from mountains, forests, or icy wastes the Creature also suggests that Shelley aligns the non-human world not only with mystery and power but also with judgement and consequence. Garrard's interpretation of nature in *Frankenstein* helps us see it as a morally charged presence claiming control when violated.

Here, nature functions as the Romantic idea of the sublime vast, breathtaking, and spiritually restoring able to subdue human pride and re-establish a relationship with something greater. Still, nature does not always play a positive part. As the narrative unfolds, Shelley turns the surrounds into a silent but strong moral force. Nature sees Victor's crime of unnatural creation and subsequently exact revenge. When Victor tells Walton his Arctic story, the silence becomes more of a form of criticism than of neutrality. The dead cold mirrors Victor's moral isolation and emotional apathy. The natural world, which used to comfort him but is now uncaring and even hostile, mirrors his spiritual collapse. Here, Lawrence Buell's remark that “environmental texts often dramatise human alienation from nature and its consequences” (Buell 8) really speaks to me. Because Victor's choice to create life artificially alienates him from the moral order of nature, the natural world becomes a force reflecting and insinuating his guilt.

Shelley also provides the scene psychological and narrative value. The creature is often linked to natural surroundings since it emerges from the forest, is seen against the background of mountains, and shows up during storms. These settings intensify his moral complexity and Gothic horror of presence, not only contain the creature. By linking natural settings to emotional or morally charged events, Shelley crafts an ecologically conscious narrative in which nature acts as an implied arbiter of human activity. The Arctic at the end of the book represents not only physical extremes but also the limits of human aspiration and the last domain where nature rules. Victor's death in this desolate environment suggests that icy, relentless silence, not violence, has last say in nature. Nature thus is neither incidental nor passive in *Frankenstein*. It is a mute witness to moral lapses, a great comfort, and finally a retribution for environmental and ethical transgressions. Shelley's portrayal supports the ecological argument that human activity and the surroundings are inextricably linked emotionally, morally, even narratively by reinforcing. Through Victor's trip from the grandeur of the Alps to the depths of the Arctic, Shelley shows the consequences of upsetting the natural order and reminds us that, despite its silence, nature is never neutral. “Shelley's writings consistently interrogate the power dynamics between nature and culture, asking whether scientific mastery over the natural world is ethically justifiable.” (Fisch p.17)

Moreover, depending on humility, guilt, and respect, ‘*Frankenstein*’ also signals towards a greater moral link with the natural world. Neglected both emotionally and physically, the Creature stands for emotional as well as environmental ignorance. His craving for company and acceptance represents the great psychological need humans have for connection—not only with other people but also with the more than human environment. If Victor had known the demands of the Creature, maybe disaster may have been avoided as if modern society had heeded ecological warnings before. Shelley's book becomes a prophetic ecological novel rather than only a gothic warning in stressing the ethical cost of denying and dominating nature. At its core, *Frankenstein* calls for a more thoughtful and compassionate relationship with the natural world one built on respect, humility, and a shared sense of responsibility. The Creature, left alone and misunderstood, is more than just a figure of emotional pain; he also represents the harm that comes from neglecting what we create or affect.

*Frankenstein* urges us to consider our relationship with the Earth as we face a future shaped by environmental uncertainty. It warns us that science without compassion and power free of ethics can rip apart the delicate fabric of life itself. Not only for its warnings on the dangers of scientific ambition, but also for its basic ecological issues, Mary Shelley's '*Frankenstein*' stays a horrific and prescient story. Viewing the book through the perspective of ecocriticism exposes Victor Frankenstein's breach of natural rules via scientific overreach as well as his ethical failure of concealing, manipulating, and finally severing his bond with the natural world. Not simply of a man who creates a monster, Shelley relates the story of a man who attempts to control nature without appreciating its intrinsic agency or moral significance. Like Victor, our society has released enormous forces climate change, loss of biodiversity, and environmental damage that we now strive to regulate. The Earth is responding to years of neglect with rising calamities and long-lasting changes, much as Victor's own works finally turn against him.

## Conclusion

Viewing the book through the perspective of ecocriticism exposes Victor Frankenstein's breach of natural rules via scientific overreach as well as his ethical failure of concealing, manipulating, and finally severing his bond with the natural world. Modern civilisation separates itself from the ecosystems it damages, much as Victor separates himself from the natural world and the being he brings to life. In both cases the outcome is a spiral of unanticipated events, suffering, and finally disaster. Once silent and majestic, nature becomes a witness and avenger responding with the inevitable results of imbalance rather than with vengeance. Shelley's message is so strong because it avoids reliance on preaching or didacticism. Rather, she illustrates—through character, emotion, and setting—what happens when we transverse the rules of life and interdependence. The Creature's suffering is not only a moral critique of Victor's desertion but also a symbolic mirror of how eventually neglected, suppressed forces social, emotional, or ecological raise themselves. The loneliness of the Creature is also the loneliness of a society detached from nature. Not only for its warnings on the dangers of scientific ambition, but also for its basic ecological issues, Mary Shelley's "*Frankenstein*" stays a horrific and prescient story. Shelley seems to be saying that disregarding the rhythms and rules of nature results in damage instead of harmony. Not from merely scientific ambition, but from an arrogant assumption that nature can be shaped to human will without consequences, his fall from grace results. Shelley's message avoids depending on preaching or didacticism, it is so powerful. Rather, she shows through character, passion, and setting what happens when we traverse the rules of life and interdependence. Apart from a moral critique of Victor's desertion, the Creature's suffering serves as a symbolic mirror of how finally neglected, suppressed forces social, emotional, or ecological raise themselves. The loneliness of the Creature is also the loneliness of a civilisation cut off from the natural world. The novel thus predicts the main questions of environmental ethics: the rights of nonhuman beings, the interconnectedness of all living forms, and the moral limits of technological capacity.

## Primary source

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