

WINTERSON'S *FRANKISSSTEIN*: POSTMODERNISM BLENDED WITH THE 19TH-CENTURY STYLE PHILOSOPHICAL LOOK

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Abstract

Jeanette Winterson's latest novel Frankissstein (2019) re-animates Shelley's Gothic classic and brings it into a contemporary world of smart-tech and artificial intelligence. The novel mainly focuses on humankind's engagement with hybridity and the troubling ramifications of technological advancements. Beginning with Shelley composing Frankenstein, the novel leaps into the present day to tell the story of Ry Shelley, a trans-gender doctor self-described as "hybrid", meeting Victor Stein, a celebrated professor working on "accelerated evolution" through "self-designing" life. The novel becomes a fragmented meditation on the responsibilities of creation, the possibilities of artificial intelligence and the implications of both transsexuality and transhumanism. The reanimation in the book is supported by historical figures such as Shelley, Byron, Ada Lovelace and Turing. The events and ideas of the past seem very much alive and lending life to the work of present and future. The first part of this paper will concentrate on the postmodernist narrative techniques of the author accompanied with philosophical questions such as "What is reality? What is time? What are the responsibilities of creation? Where are the boundaries between story and real life, between consciousness and an idea? The second part of the paper will deal with the warnings of the postmodernist novel about the inevitable human future and non-biological life forms.

Keywords: Frankissstein, Postmodernism, Philosophical Approach, Human Future

1. Introduction

Jeanette Winterson is one of the most prolific and prominent authors of British Literature whose latest novel *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019) amalgamates Mary Shelley's acclaimed Gothic classic *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) with a contemporary world of smart-tech and artificial intelligence. The novel mainly deals with humankind's engagement with hybridity and unsettling consequences of technological advancement. Thus, this article focuses on two parts, one of which will concentrate on the postmodernist narrative techniques of the author accompanied with philosophical questions such as "What is reality? What is time? What are the responsibilities of creation? Where are the boundaries between story and real life,

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between consciousness and an idea? The second part of the article will deal with the warnings of a postmodernist novel about the inevitable human future and non-biological life forms. I will argue that Winterson's *Frankissstein* represents an example of "warning for future" novels meshed with playful postmodernist techniques and 19th century style philosophical questions of reality, death, being human and non-human.

2. Main Discussion

The novel is based on two mirrored stories, one of which sets in the Alps in 1816 where the teenage Mary Shelley lives with her husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, her friend Lord Byron and the others. Inspired by her surroundings, she pens her novel about Victor Frankenstein, a young scientist who succeeds in forming a monstrous creature in a mad experiment. The second story takes place in the time of Brexit, following a transgender medical doctor, Ry Shelley (Ry is short for Mary), who falls in love and works with an innovator in artificial intelligence, Victor Stein, who is implementing some underground experiments of his own. It is revealed that Ry provides human parts for Victor. Ry and Victor come across Ron Lord (a direct attribution to Lord Byron) who produces sex dolls for lonely men.

Although postmodernism as an artistic/literary movement began to lose its traction and appeal right before the beginning of the new millennium, its literary techniques are still employed by authors such as Winterson on a large scale (McHale, 2015, p.5). In the chapter titled "Postmodernism and Literature", Barry Lewis provides some of the dominant techniques of the postmodernist fiction as follows: "temporal disorder, the erosion of the sense of time, pastiche, fragmentation, looseness of association, paranoia, vicious circles, and language disorder" (The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism, 2015, p.123). In Winterson's novel, most of these features are covered with several examples.

One of these traits of postmodernist fiction manifests itself in the use of "irony" and "playfulness" throughout the text. This trait can be considered under the category of fragmentation according to Lewis's list. To begin with, the name of the characters convey a playful tone as the contemporary versions are adaptations of Shelley's time. For instance, Mary Shelley is Ry Shelley, Victor Frankenstein becomes Victor Stein, Lord Byron turns into Ron Lord, Polidori becomes Polly D, and Claire Clairmont exists as Claire. The resemblance of the name of the characters not only enables the two stories to be intertwined and create a sense of continuity between Shelley's time of technological infancy and contemporary time of technological advancement, but it also builds a sense of playfulness through similar characters both in names and personalities.

Another example of irony and playfulness is illustrated in the scene where Mary Shelley and her fictitious character Victor Frankenstein meet in the narrator's lodging in Bedlam and have an amusing conversation:

You are Mary Shelly.

I am she.

She was composed. Unafraid.

He turned to me eagerly and said, You have shown her my papers?
All my papers?

She is acquainted with your credentials.

Yes. That is why I am here, she said.

I poured wine. I did not know what else to do. We sat down.

Unmake me, he said.

The lady gazed at him for some while. He appeared very far from mad, but very often the mad have a deep conviction the sane lack.

I am the monster you created, said Victor Frankenstein. I am the thing that cannot die – and I cannot die because I have never lived.

...

Mary Shelley seemed unafraid of his wild claims. She said, Tell me, then, sir, how have you come out of the pages of a book, and into this life?

Victor Frankenstein said, There has been an error. I should have perished on the ice. Instead I find myself here, in this madhouse, and I know that he whom I loathe is loose in the world and seeks my destruction. (Winterson, 2019, p. 144-145)

A similar scene where the owner of the lodging writes a letter to Mary Shelley regarding her fictitious character's escape creates a sense of irony and amusement which fulfills one of the necessities of a postmodern fiction: entertaining the reader: "Dear Mrs Shelley... Further to your visit, the man who calls himself Victor Frankenstein, a character in your excellent novel, has ... VANISHED"(201).

A second postmodernist technique which is widely practiced along the novel is "intertextuality". Ranging from extracts from Shelley's journal and Shakespeare's sonnets to quotes from magazines and popular songs, various examples of intertextuality, which can also be considered under the category of vicious circles by Lewis, appear in the text. One of the most frequent allusions is the Shakespeare sonnet 53 which helps us to question our "material being" and problematise our robotic future: "What is your substance, whereof are you made, That millions of strange shadows on you tend?" (The Complete Sonnets, 2002, p. 487).

The idea that "nothing is original, but all are endless copies of reality" by the cultural theorist Baudrillard (1994, p. 69) and Umberto Eco's claim of "books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told" resonate with the intertextual form of the novel (*The Name of the Rose*, 2004, p. 128). Long quotes from *Frankenstein* and Shelley's journal are meshed with Winterson's fiction in order to manifest how human ideas of existence, death, reality and intelligence have changed or not changed over a period of two centuries. The extensive use of

intertextuality also offers the author the chance with a liberating form which helps to overcome the shortcomings of “single, centralized meanings” as Hutcheon argues in her book titled *A Poetics of Postmodernism, History, Theory, Fiction* (1988, p. 127). By making use of this technique, Winterson not only searches for a continuity in the ideas of existence, reality and advancement, she is also able to lay out her opinions in a non-restricting way and problematise them from a philosophical aspect.

A third postmodernist technique which is noticeable in the novel is the use of “pastiche”. Lewis mentions this technique in his list as “creating an anagram, not of letters, but components of a style” (2001, p. 125). Especially historical fiction, science fiction and detective fiction present a wide range of opportunities for authors to capture the complexities of certain themes and to create a postmodernist miscegenation in the hope of mocking or honoring the literary piece it imitates. Winterson in her novel mimics the way Mary Shelley writes her diary with the purpose of honoring the author and creating a vibrant figure in readers’ mind:

My husband adores Byron. Each day they take a boat out on the lake, to talk about poetry and liberty, whilst I avoid Claire, who can talk about nothing ... But then the rain came, and these downpouring days allow for no lake-work. At least the weather allows no staring at us from the farther shore either. In town I heard the rumour that a guest had spied half a dozen petticoats spread out to dry on Byron’s terrace ... That night we sat around the steaming fire talking of the supernatural. Shelley is fascinated by moonlit nights and the sudden side of the ruins. He believes that every building carries an imprint of the past, like a memory, or memories, and these can be released if the time is right... (Winterson, 2019, p. 12)

Another important postmodernist technique is “temporal disorder” which has been commonly practiced by Winterson particularly in novels such as *The Passion* (1987), *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), and *The Stone Gods* (2007). Through incorporating the past and the present, the real and the imagined, Winterson reminds us that we have the technology to redesign ourselves, but in order to handle this technology we need to understand certain things about ourselves, too (Byers, the Guardian).

The novel oscillates between the early 19th century when Mary Shelley was writing her book on a trip with her husband and a circle of close friends and the 21st century world where the level of artificial intelligence poses a threat to turn Frankenstein’s fictitious life into something real and tangible. Between these periods and worlds, and a few in between, Winterson inserts passages from *Frankenstein*, sonnets from Shakespeare, popular song lyrics, and quotes from well-known people from the last three centuries with no sign of introduction or citation. Through reviving figures from the past and attaching them to her characters of her own creation, the author aims to make time seem flat instead of linear.

Last but not least, “metafiction” is employed as a postmodernist technique, which can also be considered under the category of vicious circles according to Lewis’ classification. This technique helps the author to incorporate the act of writing itself into the writing process and it involves the reader as an active participant for this

process. By doing so, the author creates a multi-layered and multi-dimensional universe which reminds the reader that what s/he is reading is imaginary and the reader starts to contemplate about the literary text. “Author’s notes” such as “THIS IS THE MOST PROFOUND THING CLAIRE HAS SAID IN HER LIFE” (93), or sentences such as “I do not know if I am the teller or the tale” (132) are clear indications of the metafiction technique in the novel.

Beneath the surface of amusement and playfulness carried out by postmodernist techniques, *Frankissstein* unfolds a serious, 19th century style philosophical stance at issues such as reality, time, death, future of humanity, responsibilities of creation, boundaries between story and real life, between consciousness and an idea etc. The speculations and lengthy disquisitions through witty dialogues on being human, consciousness, death and spirituality become a major layer of the novel, which indicates a distinction from typical postmodernist fiction. For instance, in the following quotation Victor Stein, the professor and the expert in artificial intelligence and someone interested in “accelerated evolution” via “self-designing life” have some conversations with Ry Shelley who adopts a prudent and philosophical approach towards the future of humanity. These conversations and inquiries focus on questions such as “What is human? What distinguishes us from machines? What is biological life and artificial life?:

We are our bodies, I said.

Every religion disagrees with you. Certainly, since the Enlightenment, science has disagreed with religion – but now we are returning, or arriving, at a deeper insight into what it means to be human – by which I mean it is a stage on the way to being transhuman At present, computers are spectacular at number crunching and data processing. We can code programmes that feel as though computers are interacting with us, that’s fun, but in fact they aren’t interacting in the way we expect a human being to interact. But what will happen when a programme that has self-developed, that has its own version of what we call consciousness – realises, in the human sense of the verb ‘to realise’, exactly what/ who is on the other side of the screen? ... Humans evolved. Humans are evolving. The only difference here is that we are a thinking and designing part of our own evolution. Time – evolutionary time – is speeding up. We’re not waiting for Mother Nature any more... (Winterson, 2019, p. 102-106)

The questions such as “What makes us human?” and “What distinguishes us from machines?” have been central in Winterson’s fiction. Her novel *The Stone Gods* published in 2007 narrates the emotional relationship between a human being and a robot (it is called a Robo-sapien) and explores the nature and limits of being human. The author calls into question whether blood or emotions are enough to make us human. Furthermore, Winterson puts an emphasis on the unstable and fluid nature of human body by saying “Even without any bio-engineering, the human body is in a constantly changing state. What you are today will not be what you are in days, months, years” (2007, p. 44-45). This approach to being human is resonated with Donna Haraway’s ideas on human body. In a similar fashion, Haraway believes that

as humans we are all subject to change due to the relationship between human being and technical power:

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation. In the traditions of ‘Western’ science and politics [...] the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. (“A Cyborg Manifesto”1991, p. 150)

The capability of evolving and self-repairing of the Robo-Sapien in *The Stone Gods* indicates the transitional state of the intelligent machines as in Haraway’s statement of “the distinction between human and machine no longer makes sense: we have all become cyborgs” (1991, p. 149). The human-machine amalgamation is addressed more overtly and comprehensively in *Frankissstein*. The existence of self-powered and artificially intelligent robots continue to challenge our perception of “what separates us from non-human intelligence”. The novel goes one step further and elaborates on this distinction by putting forward the subject matter of “transference of consciousness into machines”. The dialogue on future humans between Victor Stein and Ry Shelley clarifies the ambiguous and controversial human-machine intimacy and exchange:

Humans will learn how to halt and reverse the ageing process; we will all live healthier and longer lives. We’re still biology but we’re better biology. Alongside that, we can enhance ourselves with smart implants to improve our physical and mental capacities. Alternatively, because biology is limited, we abolish death, at least for some people, by uploading our minds out of their biological beginnings. I interrupted him, But then we’re just a computer programme. He frowned. Why do you say ‘just’? Do you think Stephen Hawking, whose body was useless to him, was ‘just’ a mind? He was a mind, certainly, and the closest thing we have seen to an exceptional and fully conscious human mind trapped in a body. What if we had been able to free his mind? (Winterson, 2019, p. 81)

The end of “humanity” used in the conventional sense is also underlined as part of human-machine interaction. Hayles’s concept of “posthuman” which emerges from historical understandings of technology and culture along with the idea that human intelligence is co-produced with intelligent machines is embodied in the discussions of “accelerated evolution” which allows for existence of non-physical entities replaced with human beings (*How We Became Posthuman*, 1999, p. 2). When asked about the possible extinction of homo sapiens, Victor attributes a new meaning to the word “extinction” and considers it a changing form of existence:

Do you believe that will happen? I said.

Victor shrugged. What do we mean by extinction? If we can upload some human minds to a non-physical platform, then what? Biological extinction perhaps. I don't like the word 'extinction' – it is alarmist.

That's because being wiped out is alarming, I said.

Don't be so tabloid, said Victor. Think of it as accelerated evolution. (Winterson, 2019, p. 135)

The concept of "reality" is another subject matter overwhelming the entire book. Untitled chapters begin with a sentence about "reality" such as "Reality is water-soluble, Reality bends in the heat, What is the temperature of reality?, Hope is our reality?, Reality is ... what?" As postmodernist novels put into question the traditional labels such as certainty, unity, reality, center, continuity etc., Winterson chooses to problematise "reality" not to deny it but rather to interrogate its nature and relation to everyday experience in our modern life. In her book titled *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effronter*, she elaborates on the flexibility and unordinary form of "reality" as follows: "The earth is not flat and neither is reality. Reality is continuous, multiple, simultaneous, complex, abundant and partly invisible" (1997, p. 151). The unitary and versatile characteristics of "reality" is also emphasized through Ali/x as a virtual reality of multiple possibilities in the book titled *Gut Symmetries*: "In quantum reality there are millions of possible worlds, unactualised, potential, perhaps bearing in on us, but only reachable by wormholes we can never find (1999, p. 53). Even "space" and "time" which constitute the concept of "reality" becomes fluid, uncertain and inconsistent in Winterson's fiction. In her novel *Weight*, it is argued that there are no definite boundaries between past, present and future: "I realize now that the past does not dissolve like a mirage. I realize that the future, through invisible, has weight. We are in the gravitational pull of past and future" (2005, p. 66). In a similar fashion, "space" is presented as a multi-dimensional, mobile and borderless notion: "What limits? There are none...There are no straight lines. The lines that smooth across the page, deceive. Straightforward is not the geometry of space. In space, nothing tends directly..." (2005, p. 94). In *Frankissstein*, the centuries old question "What is reality?" is dealt with again as in Winterson's most books but this time it is addressed more directly, overtly and in relation to artificial intelligence:

What is reality? I said. To you?

It's not a noun, said Victor. It's not a thing or object. It isn't objective.

I accept that our experience of reality isn't objective. My subjective experience of the desert will be different to yours, but the desert is really there...

Then what is reality? The best minds have asked this question forever, said Victor. I cannot answer it. What I can say is that just as consciousness appears to be an emergent property of brain function – you can't pinpoint consciousness biologically – it is as elusive as the seat of the soul – but we would agree that consciousness exists – and

we would agree that at present machine intelligence isn't conscious. So perhaps reality is also an emergent property – it exists, but it is not the material fact we take it to be. (Winterson, 2019, p. 82)

Winterson's *Frankissstein* does not rest solely on exploring the possible implications of artificial intelligence and limits of biological existence which might pave the way for a better future. At the same time, it brings forward the concerns in relation to the responsibilities of creating new life forms and whether these artificial life forms can replace humans or even rule over them. The cautious attitude and apprehension towards "machines that will learn to think for themselves" can be classified under three categories: increasing human greed, end of humanity, and sexbots.

Rapacity and its destructive reverberations are one of the main concerns of a growing artificial intelligence trend and an implication of this trend will be experienced in space colonisation, according to Winterson. Manipulating technological supremacy for hegemonic goals and aspirations and therefore, claiming mastery over non-human entities on other planets are what Winterson criticise in the novel:

We cannot live indefinitely in human form on this earth, and the only way we can seriously colonise space is by not being in human form. Once out of these bodies we can handle any atmosphere, any temperature, lack of food and water, distances of any kind, providing we have an energy source. (Winterson, 2019, p. 188)

The second concern regarding the superiority of non-human forms over humans is the underlying idea that artificial life forms will have the potential to terminate the human race on Earth. The fact that robots will be independent and eternal entities which will have the capacity to evolve and self-repair themselves can cause various confrontations and many stalemates in terms of human-machine relations. A similar concern about a possible demolishing of humans by machines is raised in *The Written on the Body*: "Luddite? No, I don't want to smash the machines but neither do I want the machines to smash me" (1994, p. 80). *Frankissstein* deepens these controversies with the help of Ry Shelley's well-reasoned questions and the inquiries of the audience in Victor Stein's lecture to the public. Last but not least, sexbots and related products are illustrated and discussed for possible adverse effects on the social, psychological, and sexual sides of human nature.

3. Conclusion

Two notable contemporary British writers – Jeanette Winterson and Ian Mc Ewan – published novels about artificial intelligence and human-machine relations in 2019. In the previous year, two important British writers – James Smythe and Will Eaves – published *I Still Dream* and *Murmur*, respectively. They also deal with issues such as algorithms, consciousness and artificial intelligence. This is an indication that controversies about technological advancement and its challenging ramifications are becoming a pivotal preoccupation of today's British fiction. With this work of fiction, Winterson "manages to pay homage to Shelley's insight and passion while demonstrating her own extraordinary creativity" (Charles, the Washington Post). Moreover, Winterson's *Frankissstein* makes room for itself in an increasingly popular

field by means of engagement with hybridity. In this hybrid example, postmodernist techniques and philosophical inquiries go hand in hand. Furthermore, the novel's plot combines two different stories (one from Mary Shelley, the other from a modern-day character Ry Shelley) in order to manifest the continuity of human's desire for creating life forms for almost two centuries. The main character Ry Shelley's gender (a transsexual) and Victor Stein's experiments/attempts to create a transhuman are also part of the hybridity the novel encapsulates.

After publishing *The Powerbook* (2000) and *The Stone Gods*, Winterson has focused on human-machine relations more extensively and profoundly in *Frankissstein*. The romantic relationship between a human and a Robo-sapien and the notion of "self-evolving machines" in *The Stone Gods* is followed by hard science and dreamy romanticism and the same notion of independently thinking and self-repairing machines in *Frankissstein*. On the other hand, Winterson's recent novel allocates more space for the discussions of artificial intelligence and its possible consequences for humanity. The lengthy disquisitions on the moral obstacles of creating non-biological life forms, metaphysical conversations between the Shelleys and Byron, the illustration of how human ideas of existence, intelligence and creativity have changed or have not changed over the course of two hundred years are some of the characteristics which distinguish Winterson's novel from its precursors mentioned above.

Even though *Frankissstein* has its share from postmodernist techniques such as irony, playfulness, intertextuality, pastiche, and metafiction on the surface, it becomes the embodiment of an "awareness-raising" and "warning for future" novel with the help of 19th century style philosophical inquiries and related ethical concerns about the future of humanity. Notions such as "reality", "death", "consciousness", "being human", "non-human" are called into question. The advantages and disadvantages of creating non-biological forms are discussed and ethical concerns are raised. Beneath all the amusement and playfulness created by postmodernist techniques, Winterson calls for the reader to realise the graveness of technological advancement for human race and to contemplate on ourselves and our creations. Readers are expected to question the changing nature of human-machine relations and prepare themselves for its possible consequences. By juxtaposing Shelley's process of creating a monster at the beginning of 19th century with Victor Stein's creating artificial life forms in the 21st century, Winterson reminds the reader the inevitable outcome which is imminent for humanity: the future. As Mary Shelley prophesizes from the 19th century in the novel: "The march of the machines is now and forever. The box has been opened. What we invent we cannot uninvent. The world is changing" (94), non-human life forms will become a part of our lives sooner or later and this inevitable fact will continue to be a part of British fiction.

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