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Reanimating the Posthuman: Gender, Technology, and Identity in Jeanette Winterson's Frankissstein

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Abstract
Jeanette Winterson's Frankissstein: A Love Story (2019) reimagines Mary Shelley's Frankenstein through a postmodern, posthuman lens. By intertwining the historical figure of Mary Shelley with a futuristic narrative featuring AI, cryogenics, and transhumanism, Winterson critiques the ambitions of techno-capitalism while exploring the fluidity of gender, identity, and embodiment. This paper examines how Frankissstein deconstructs binaries—man/machine, past/future, male/female—and challenges the ethics of technological "progress" in relation to the human body. Employing theoretical insights from posthumanism, queer theory, and feminist techno-science studies, the paper argues that Winterson constructs a literary space where the monstrous is not what lies beyond the human, but what arises within it—through our longing for immortality, control, and reinvention.
Keywords: Jeanette Winterson, Frankissstein, Posthumanism, Gender, Artificial Intelligence, Transhumanism, Queer Theory, Frankenstein, Ethics of Technology

Introduction

Jeanette Winterson's Frankissstein revives the anxieties, ambitions, and philosophical provocations of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein in the context of twenty-first-century technology and identity politics. Published in 2019, Winterson's novel not only reimagines Shelley's creation myth through the lens of AI and robotics but also foregrounds questions of gender fluidity, bodily autonomy, and technological immortality. Winterson weaves two narrative threads: one following Mary Shelley in the early 19th century and the other set in a dystopian near future, featuring Ry Shelley, a transgender doctor and narrator, and Victor Stein, a transhumanist obsessed with mind uploading. Through this duality, Winterson collapses the temporal and ideological distance between the Romantic and the posthuman, revealing that the core questions of identity, mortality, and power remain unresolved.

Frankissstein blends historical fiction, speculative science fiction, romance, and philosophical inquiry. Much like Frankenstein (1818), it is a novel of doubles: Mary Shelley and Ry Shelley; Victor Frankenstein and Victor Stein; scientific hubris and emotional vulnerability. This structural mirroring allows Winterson to interrogate how narratives of creation, especially male-driven techno-narratives, have historically erased or sidelined female and queer perspectives. The dual narrative structure also mirrors the construction of the posthuman subject as described by theorists like Rosi Braidotti. In The Posthuman, Braidotti asserts, “The posthuman is a convergence phenomenon: human and non-human, organic and technological, nature and culture” (Braidotti 89). Winterson’s hybrid narrative is a formal embodiment of this convergence, refusing singular truths or linear development.

Ry Shelley, a transgender doctor and AI researcher, is the most compelling articulation of Winterson’s posthuman subject. They embody the breakdown of binaries—neither fully male nor female, human nor machine. Ry’s identity resists categorization, aligning with Donna Haraway’s concept of the cyborg: a creature in a “post-gender world” (Haraway 150). Ry reflects, “What I want is not to be reduced to my body. Not to be reduced at all” (Winterson 28).

Their body is central to the novel’s ethical debates: should humanity strive to transcend the body through technology, or accept it as the site of human experience? Ry’s embodiment challenges Victor Stein’s mind-body dualism. Whereas Stein envisions a post-biological future, Ry insists on the embodied reality of human existence, pain, and love.

Victor Stein represents the contemporary technocratic elite obsessed with transhumanism—the belief that humans can and should evolve beyond their biological limitations. He supports cryogenics, consciousness uploading, and artificial life as steps toward an immortal, disembodied future. In his vision, the mind is the only essential component of personhood.

Winterson satirizes this rationalist hubris, much like Shelley’s critique of Frankenstein. Stein’s ambitions echo Victor Frankenstein’s desire to “banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable” (Frankenstein 22). However, where Shelley’s Frankenstein laments the result of his ambition, Stein seems chillingly unrepentant. Winterson underscores the ethical costs of this mindset, particularly the erasure of the body and the marginalization of those who do not conform to “ideal” techno-bodies.

The human body—its fluidity, vulnerability, and resilience—is central to Frankissstein. In contrast to the disembodied techno-fantasy, Winterson reclaims the body as a site of agency, resistance, and becoming. The character of Ry refuses both medical essentialism and digital transcendence. Their gender identity is not a rejection of the body but a redefinition of its potential.

Winterson’s treatment of embodiment aligns with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, where identity is not fixed but constituted through repeated acts (Butler 33). Ry’s navigation through a world that seeks to erase bodily difference underscores the political and ethical importance of lived experience. In contrast, characters like Ron Lord-a grotesque entrepreneur selling AI sex dolls-commercialize the female form, exposing how technological reproduction can entrench misogyny.

Mary Shelley’s narrative—interwoven with the contemporary plot—grounds Frankissstein in the literary and philosophical legacy of Frankenstein. Winterson returns us to the Villa Diodati, where Mary, Byron, and Polidori explore the implications of scientific discovery and human ambition. Mary’s grief over the death of her child and her conflicted views about creation echo Ry’s own feelings of bodily loss and reinvention.

Through this historical anchor, Winterson posits that the fears and desires that animated Romanticism—mortality, creation, hubris, alienation—persist in the age of AI. Mary Shelley’s creature becomes a metaphor for all forms of otherness—queer, non-binary, posthuman—that society fears and marginalizes. Winterson’s homage is not nostalgic but recursive: by revisiting Shelley, she reinserts the feminine and queer into a literary genealogy often dominated by male techno-utopianism.

Despite its serious themes, Frankissstein is marked by wit, satire, and irony. The grotesque figure of Ron Lord—who mass-produces sexbots modeled on subservient femininity—is both comedic and horrifying. His casual sexism and capitalist logic expose the dangers of technological advancement without ethical accountability. Winterson's humor becomes a form of resistance against the deterministic, masculinist vision of the future.

The novel critiques not only the tech industry's ethical vacuum but also its cultural imagination. Who gets to design the future? Who is excluded from it? Winterson's answer is clear: a future designed without the voices of the marginalized will only reproduce existing inequalities in silicon and code.

At its heart, Frankissstein is a love story—between Ry and Victor, between past and future, between humans and their creations. Winterson does not reject technology; rather, she demands an ethics of relationality. Drawing on Donna Haraway's notion of "becoming-with" (Haraway 3), the novel imagines a future where humans and machines co-evolve not through dominance but through care, accountability, and mutual transformation.

Ry and Victor's complicated relationship mirrors this tension. While Stein seeks to abandon the body, Ry insists on love, fragility, and interdependence. The novel's final tone is ambiguous yet hopeful: technology can be monstrous or miraculous—but only if we choose to make it human.

Conclusion

Jeanette Winterson's Frankissstein offers a vital intervention into contemporary debates on artificial intelligence, gender, and the posthuman. Through a richly layered narrative that bridges centuries and identities, Winterson reclaims the future from techno-dystopians and reimagines it through a queer, feminist, and ethical lens.

The novel challenges us to rethink what it means to be human—not in opposition to machines, but in relation to them. In this new age of synthetic life and digital embodiment, Frankissstein reminds us that the monster is not the Other we create—but the part of ourselves we refuse to confront.

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