

## ***Frankenstein: A Literary Perspective on the Coronavirus Pandemic***

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, building on Stanley Fish's reader-response theoretical insights in "interpretive communities", shapes the readers' reception of the novel coronavirus pandemic. It argues that tagging the virus as the "Frankenstein virus" is informed by imaginative resemblances between the narratives of Victor Frankenstein's scientific engagement and the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, referencing *Frankenstein* nowadays underlines the terror that is haunting the public imagination upon the coronavirus outbreak and its mutations into more lethal variants. It also reveals how the novel makes its readers susceptible to promote the hypothesis on the coronavirus's human engineering and manipulation. The paper also explains how *Frankenstein* manages the contagion embedded in Victor's monster by 'othering' it, which helps the reader recognize the importance of the preventive measures, such as self-distancing and stay-at-home orders to downplay the spread of the virus and promote the psychological and physical wellbeing of the public.

**Keyword:** Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Plague literature, Readers' reception, "Interpretive communities," Coronavirus pandemic

### **Introduction**

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) has been flagged as a must-read plague fable in the time of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The pandemic has also triggered an interest in Shelley's "*The Last Man*" (1826), Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353), Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death: A*

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*Fantasy* (1842), and Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* (1947), to mention some of them.<sup>1</sup> Plague literature shares some characteristics in its treatment of the plague. In "*Plague in Literature and Myth*," Girard Rene explores features of literature's treatment of the theme of the plague by drawing examples from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1609), Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Rene argues that the treatment of the different plagues in these works is marked by a "strange uniformity" (833). This uniformity is manifested in the fact that plagues, as represented in literature, blur all differences, overcome all obstacles, and transgress all boundaries (834). Moreover, literary representations of plagues magnify their concomitant impact on the social element. Rene writes, "Between the plague and social disorder there is a reciprocal affinity, but it does not completely explain the confusion of the two that prevails . . . in a good number of literary plagues, from ancient times to contemporary culture" (834). The confusion between the medical and social, as Rene highlights, indicates literature's appropriation of the plague into a "generic label" that alludes to ills in the cultural, psychological, and social arenas. Put differently, literary engagement with the theme of the plague has transformed it into a "metaphor" that "is endowed with an almost incredible vitality," as Rene asserts. Plagues sustain themselves because of their "contagious character" (836), which is terrifying as they are rapidly transmitted from one person to another. Imagined or metaphoric plagues, such as ideas and mindsets are also infectious as they travel from one mind to another or from one text to another. Plagued ideas, like actual plagues, are difficult to contain without incurring significant costs. The "sacrificial element" (841) is presented in plague literature, according to Rene, as a potential cost one pays to heal society.

Shelley's *Frankenstein* does not discuss real viral plagues. It explores humans' pursuit of knowledge as reflected in Victor Frankenstein's ambition to discover the "elixir of life." His experimentation finally produces a hideous creature that devastates the life of its creator. That being said, the plague in the novel resides first in the proclivities that produce the monster and, second, in the monster as it incarnates a destructive character, something that Victor Frankenstein mostly fears. Therefore, he refuses to create a female companion for the monster in order not to procreate itself. This explains the readership consensus on the importance of Shelley *Frankenstein* in discussing metaphoric and real plagues like the current coronavirus pandemic. During the current pandemic's outbreak, the coronavirus was dubbed the "new Frankenstein" and "Frankenstein virus." In addition, a recent "recombinant" hybrid XE variant of the coronavirus was added to the list of variants, the first of which was identified at a seafood market in Wuhan Province, China, in December 2019. The new variant was "unofficially" called the "Frankenstein" variant (Sachs 2022). The XE variant has been detected in January in the United Kingdom and across the Atlantic. It was given the name "Frankenstein" because of its "fusion status", that is, it is a "blend of Omicron BA.1 and the BA.2 'stealth' version" (Sachs 2022). The constant mutations of the virus have caused uncertainty about the reliability of the measures taken so far to combat the pandemic and deepened the debate over determining whether the virus has emerged naturally or has been engineered and assembled.

## *Frankenstein*: A Literary Perspective on the Coronavirus Pandemic

Shelley's *Frankenstein* has long been referenced while discussing controversial scientific quests; biomedical engineering and technology in particular. In *Frankenstein's Footsteps: Science, Genetics and Popular Culture*, Jon Turney argued that *Frankenstein* is "the governing myth of modern biology" (1998, 3). Shelley's novel has acquired this disposition because the continuous "retelling" (4) of Victor Frankenstein's story has clearly shown that science and scientific achievements have been the subject of intellectual debates. These debates mark a division in opinions and suspicions about what modern science and scientists pursue "at a time when a variety of explanations are on offer for what is seen as opposition to some new science and technology" (3). In particular, Victor Frankenstein's story, according to Turney, "expresses many of the deepest fears and desires about modernity, especially about violation of the body. The human body is both a stable ground for experience in a time of unprecedentedly rapid change and a fragile, limited vessel which we yearn to remake" (4). As far as we are concerned, referencing *Frankenstein* in the time of the current pandemic underlines the readers' discomfort over what science does and can do in the future. This discomfort can be experienced by nonscientist and scientist readers because scientific achievements are being discussed within scientific circles.

In "Facing the Pariah of Science: The Frankenstein Myth as a Social and Ethical Reference for Scientists," Peter Nagy et al. (2019) explained how Shelley's novel has been acting as a moral and ethical censor in the scientific domain. Scientists and biologists, according to the researchers, can benefit from *Frankenstein* as it reminds them of "the consequences of scientific misconduct and failures, as well as fundamental debates about what "counts" as science, which in turn could provide opportunities for them to deepen their knowledge of science ethics" (740). In terms of the attitudes toward science the novel conveys, Nagy and his colleagues hold that "Frankenstein myth suggests that scientists' inventions, whether they are biological, artificial, or both, can become dangerous, disrupt existing social order, transform human life into something beyond people's comprehension, or even turn against humankind" (741). Referencing the novel nowadays suggests that this line of thinking still haunts the public imagination, at least the imagination of those who are acquainted with the story of Victor Frankenstein. In other words, integrating *Frankenstein* into conversations over the coronavirus pandemic underlines a controversy over it.

### **Argument**

Far from being a mere renewed interest in *Frankenstein* nowadays, there has been a readership consensus on the emblematic significance of the novel in scientific and intellectual controversies. Therefore, the present study endeavors to explore how the novel maintains this consensus in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Shelley's novel, as we argue, shapes its readers' reception of the current pandemic by providing answers to the questions "where does it come from?", "How does it look like?", "What has made it possible?", "What should be done?" and "Will it end?" These questions permeate intellectual and public conversations on the pandemic.

Building on Stanley Fish's reader-response premises of "interpretive strategies and interpretive communities," we maintain that referencing *Frankenstein* at the time of the coronavirus pandemic extends the readership consensus over the position of the novel in negotiating scientific controversies.

This consensus speculates an analogy between the story of Victor Frankenstein and the pandemic, as well as a potential uniformity and consistency that mark the readers' experience with the two narratives, though the readers might belong to different spatial and temporal contexts. This uniformity should not be surprising. According to Fish, those who reference *Frankenstein*, though they belong to spatially and temporally separate zones, are "contemporary in their shared concerns" (2010, 1975). The explanation of the agreement of *Frankenstein's* potential interpretations refers to the readers' deployment of shared "interpretive strategies." These strategies constitute readers' predispositions and ready-made expectations of the text. These predispositions and expectations are manufactured by the reading experience of the text. Coinages such as "Frankenstein virus" underpin an interpretive agreement on the implications of the *topoi* "Frankenstein" that readers constantly use to describe any excesses and deviations. These readers, according to Fish, act within "Interpretive Communities." Fish defines these communities as "those who share interpretive strategies for writing texts rather than reading them, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions." (1991). These strategies are not engendered by the text itself. Rather, they are external products produced by the readers' intellectual orientations and material contexts. Fish maintains that, "these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as it is usually assumed, the other way around" (1991). The readers' reproduction of *Frankenstein* in the time of the coronavirus pandemic has underpinned the commonality of the strategies that have been long deployed by readers on the text. It has also sustained and expanded the interpretive communities who maintain the same attitudes toward the work.

Therefore, this study argues that witnesses of the COVID-19 pandemic, with Victor Frankenstein's quest as their guide, are more susceptible to inculcating unsubstantiated theories that explain the pandemic. First, present-day readers view the coronavirus as something that has been engineered or manipulated. The virus is, potentially, like Victor's monster, the outcome of an ambitious and indulgent spirit that is driven by imaginative scientific impulses. Following this line of thinking, one can speculate that those scientists who have allegedly created the coronavirus have spent days and nights, similar to Victor Frankenstein, experimenting in their labs, the result of which is a virus that, similar to Victor's monster, has gone off the loose. This speculation finds room in scientific attempts to understand the pandemic. El-Magd (2020) hints at the possibility that "Frankenstein's monster [referring to the coronavirus] [is] assembled in the laboratory during a vaccine development trial on bats and was disseminated unintendedly to people [...]" (7).

Another vocal point to be highlighted here is how Shelley's *Frankenstein* provokes its readers to reappraise the measures endorsed on the individual, public, and official levels to downplay the spread of the coronavirus and mitigate the catastrophic outcomes of the pandemic. These measures include self-distancing, social distancing, self-quarantine, stay-at-home orders and lockdowns amidst the fears of effecting social disintegration and hindering human communication, which is essential to the social, psychological and economic well-being of human life. These measures have been lampooned as being "more destructive than the virus itself" (Stephens 2020). However, Shelley's circumscription of Victor's

quest and narrative encourages the reader to appreciate the effectiveness of enclosure, self-distancing, and quarantine to quench real viral and virtual contagious mindsets and practices.

Images of infected people from the virus that flooded hospitals around the world and the news of forthcoming lockdowns have invoked the same panic that Shelley's monster engendered. The virus, similar to the monster, wrecks the lives of all people, including the dearest ones. As witnesses of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Frankenstein's* readers revive those "scenes of evil and despair" (Shelley 2012, 101) Victor Frankenstein watches since the monster killed Henry Clerval, Victor's best friend, and Elizabeth Lavenza, his bride. Nonetheless, the horror of the pandemic witnesses is more distressing because they, unlike Victor Frankenstein, are unable to identify the "invisible enemy." This coronavirus poses an intricate riddle in all aspects: its origin, high infection rate, mutations, and, most importantly, the absence of any potential vaccines that can fully cure the infected or immunize them against infection.

According to El-Magd (2020), the coronavirus differs from other viruses like the SARS-CoV (originating in China in 2002-2003) and the MERS-CoV (found in Saudi Arabia in 2012) because it has two different, unprecedented features: "The first is the high contagious rate, and the second is the immune response evasion." "The higher transmission ability makes this virus quickly spread worldwide with a high mortality rate" (1). Having said that, the coronavirus has extended its malicious impact to wreak havoc on people's psychological well-being. The virus might live for a long time without any near-term medical treatment, but infection is apparently inevitable, and is mostly deadly. This terrifying belief has compelled people to adopt a new way of life that prioritizes sanitizers and solitude in order to protect themselves from the virus. This dilemma is complicated further as it turns out that sanitation and isolation have not completely defeated the virus.

This corresponds as well to the incredible havoc the pandemic has caused in the social and economic spheres of life, which Slavoj Žižek (2020) summed up in "*Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*" as follows: "We are caught in a triple crisis: medical ..., economic (which will hit hard whatever the outcome of the epidemic), and psychological. The basic coordinates of the everyday lives of millions are disintegrating, and the change will affect everything, from flying to holidays to simple bodily contact" (90). Indeed, the pandemic has cultivated different images in the public imagination. On the one hand, the pandemic has posed a serious existential threat that, echoing the mythical great delusion, has made the world seem apocalyptic. On the other hand, the pandemic marks the end of current history and the introduction of a new one in which basic principles of life like communication, freedom, and social integration are redefined.

### **Genealogy of referencing**

The idea of referencing Shelley's *Frankenstein* at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic expands a genealogy of literary reflection on humans' interaction with the universe and knowledge quest. In particular, referencing the novel nowadays has extended a line of moral and intellectual commentary on Victor Frankenstein's scientific inquisition and its consequences. In the novel, Captain Walton establishes this line by referencing Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*" (1798) in his correspondence with Margaret Saville, his sister, in which he reveals his "trembling sensation, half

pleasurable and half fearful, with which [he is] preparing to depart” to the “unexplored regions” of the North Antarctic (Shelley 2012, 56). On the one hand, his pleasure emanated from the high possibility of accomplishing the grand errand.

On the other hand, his fear can be attributed to the lack of previous examples of people embarking on similar expeditions to “the land of mist and snow” (56) and deducing lessons from their success or failure. Captain Walton apparently bears the example of the ancient mariner in his mind. He assured his sister that he “shall do nothing rashly; you know me sufficiently to confide in my prudence and considerateness whenever the safety of others is committed to my care” (56). In particular, Walton drew on the act of killing the albatross by the Mariner. Therefore, Walton comforted his sister by saying that he “shall kill no albatross” (56), and thus she had not to be alarmed for [his] safety or the safety of his crew, be it physical or mental.

Captain Walton was well aware that killing the albatross had brought the curse upon the Mariner and his crew. Critics view the act of killing the albatross by the Mariner as a violation of the order of nature, which is inevitably intact and well-carved. In this regard, Ramsey (2019) argued that “The killing of the albatross indicates the Mariner’s need to carve the boundaries of the known and unknown and establish certainty. The albatross is a divine benefaction but also an undeniable reminder of a transcendently ordered universe: it’s that order which the Mariner is unconsciously rebelling against it” (349). Walton’s use of the story of the ancient Mariner highlighted his awareness of the need to check his ambitious quest for progress through moral and ethical accountability. Walton acknowledges that he seeks to “sate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man. These are my enticements, and they are sufficient to conquer all fear of danger or death” (Shelley 2012, 52).

However, Captain Walton had the opportunity to regulate his curiosity and reconsider his safety and the safety of others before he embarked on his expedition. Victor Frankenstein that warned him that “I will not lead you on, unguarded and ardent as I then was, to your destruction and infallible misery” (80). Actual experience has proven to Victor Frankenstein the incentives that fed his quest were not mindfully considered. He believed that “The labours of men of genius, however erroneously directed, scarcely ever fail in ultimately turning to the solid advantage of mankind” (76). For Victor, success has nothing to do with what one pursues as much as who pursues it; great minds essentially produce beneficial knowledge. However, the novel motivates the reader to draw lines between what can be considered “good” or “bad” science or “what counts as science” (Nagy et al. 2020, 740). In this domain, Victor’s downfall refers to his Promethean position, assuming the role of the creator. Similar to the Mariner, Victor, according to Ramsey:

denied a higher order as Adam and Eve did. Frankenstein violates the rules of nature and assumes the position of God. When talking about his and Elizabeth’s differences in interests and disposition, Victor says, ‘The world was to me a secret which I desired to the divine’ (Shelley 1818, 31). The diction here both describes his urge to

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solve the secret riddles of natural science, but also ironically demonstrates that he's usurping the role of God. (Ramsey 2019, 349)

Victor apparently grasped such a thing as he warned Walton saying "my friend, that you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted; that cannot be: listen patiently until the end of my story, and you will easily perceive why I am reserved upon that subject" (Shelley 2012, 79-80). Therefore, telling his tale is expected to instruct Walton on how to self-discipline his desire and quest.

Referencing *Frankenstein* during the time of the coronavirus pandemic underlines the readers' predisposition to uphold unsubstantiated theories that attempt to understand and explain it. In other words, current readers are prone to treat Shelley's enterprise, and Coleridge's before it, as prophecies that exemplify the consequences of humans' catastrophic intervention in the environmental order. This intervention is endless, and its manifestations are still being discerned at the moment. So, as the coronavirus turned into the "new Frankenstein," those who coin this tag apparently advocate the assumption that modern bio-pharmacological and biotechnological sciences have virtually, like Victor Frankenstein, killed the albatross by ignoring the fact that we are all on the same boat like that of the ancient Mariner.

Referencing Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the time of the current pandemic, as we argue, emphasizes the following point: Victor Frankenstein's enticements continue to exist in today's world; consequently, a plight that replicates Victor Frankenstein's is then inevitable. Shelley has apparently succeeded in containing the reproduction of Victor Frankenstein's model by magnifying its devastating failure. Victor has experienced a normal failure but one that was about to kill him. Shelley made Victor himself dramatize his ruin to Captain Walton, who is expected then to consider Victor's fault and read it using the same interpretive lenses he used to read the ancient Mariner's predicament. Going through this process, Captain Walton expected to regulate his engagement with these failed models and inculcate alternative morally-regulated.

When it comes to the current coronavirus pandemic, physical communication and contact are accomplices. Žižek (2020) maintained that the pandemic has no genealogy; it is "a result of natural contingency at its purest, that it just happened and hides no deeper meaning (14). As the pandemic does not invoke deeper speculations, Žižek (2020), by suggesting a materialist reading of the narrative, maintained that we should rather explore the "social conditions that made the coronavirus possible" (13). As a result, Žižek contends that we should "resist the temptation to treat the ongoing epidemic as something that has a deeper meaning: the cruel but just punishment of humanity for the ruthless exploitation of other forms of life on earth" (14). It follows then that reading the pandemic as a byproduct of human intervention is implausible as this understanding presupposes humans' central position in the universe and their active engagement with their universe, a thing that the ancient Mariner, Captain Walton and Victor Frankenstein actually demonstrated.

However, Žižek maintained that "If we search for such a hidden message, we remain premodern: we treat our universe as a partner in communication. Even if our very survival is threatened, there is something reassuring in the fact that we are punished, the universe (or even somebody-out-there) is engaging with us" (14). We hold that *Frankenstein* compels us to refute Žižek's premise. The novel

challenges simplistic explanations of the pandemic and instead provokes its readers to explore the deeper intellectual, epistemological and ideological manifestations of the coronavirus pandemic. Contrary to Žižek's contention that "[i]n the larger order of things, we are just a species with no special importance" (14), the stories of the Mariner and Victor Frankenstein, in addition to referencing *Frankenstein* nowadays, underpin humans' active engagement with the universe. This engagement is honed by the individual's strong will and fervent quest for knowledge and the capability to engage with the universe in different forms, utilizing different tools, and taking different pathways.

This is not to say referencing *Frankenstein* then and now implies the novel's anti-science standpoint. Rather, the failure of Victor's quest might be attributed to the sort of science it belongs to and the way he executed it, a claim that can also be applied to the coronavirus. In this regard, Paul Stock (2010) argued that Shelley's definition of "Frankenstein's project as interventionist or 'bad' science and his creature as an antievolutionary species composed Frankenstein is an over-reacher, whose glorious successes precipitate the disastrous failure of both human and animal organs" (101). In terms of the novel's engagement with the social and political currents of its time, *Frankenstein* is believed to promote the ethos of failed, disenchanting, revolutionary thinking, which swept over Europe in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Stock (2010) maintained that "Frankenstein's experimentation is therefore associated with the unorthodoxy and social radicalism of revolutionary ideas; Victor Frankenstein's activities are ideologically connected with radical attempts to reshape European society and also connected with the controversial trajectory of recent history" (101). Therefore, Victor Frankenstein's failure is actually "self-destructive," and it indicates, as Stock puts it, "the degeneration of other radical ideas, similarly identified in contemporary works with the unorthodox thinkers of Ingolstadt University" (101).

Indeed, referencing *Frankenstein* nowadays suggests an amounting belief in the similarities between Victor Frankenstein's world and ours, at least to those who endorse this reference. Today's world is rigged by political and social upheavals as well as contests over technological and scientific supremacy, all of which might license the quest for unorthodox and radical scientific experimentation. Following this line of thinking, one can venture to claim that today's public is apparently haunted by a belief, that Shelley had apparently herself internalized more than 200 years ago. This belief, as Anne Mellor demonstrates, "is the myth of modern science that a scientist can create something that could destroy us all" and this "feeling is still with us, whether we are thinking about nuclear bombs, bioterrorism, anthrax, and the list goes on. While the experiments have changed, the capacity of scientific intervention in the workings of nature has only increased, so the myth becomes more and more relevant" (Wolf 2018). Readers of the current pandemic seem to keep this myth as their guidepost. For them, it is not impossible to postulate that "bad-science" has incubated the coronavirus. This speculation flooded the media at the outset of the pandemic.

Bill Gertz wrote in *The Washington Times* that the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has propelled leaks on "biological warfare" (2020). This belief builds on suspicions of secret militarized scientific projects China has been undergoing utilizing biomedical research. This allegation is not yet confirmed. Controversy marks scientific research, mediated communication and public debate on the

pandemic. At the inception of the pandemic outbreak, experts and the public attitudes were prone to believe that COVID-19 stemmed from animals at the Hunan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China. Later, the World Health Organization announced in December 2020 that the virus is “airborne” (Lewis 2022). As discussed earlier, Shelley’s *Frankenstein* does not discuss a contagious viral infection transmitted by air or corporeal contact, which makes it less effective in supplementing the medical perspective on the nature or origin of the coronavirus.

Yet, *Frankenstein*, we maintain, reflects on how to manage our coexistence with the viral pandemic. Building on Rene’s aforementioned reflections on plague literature, we should argue that *Frankenstein*, grapples with diseased mindsets, that is, Victor’s abuse of science and his intellect. These mindsets can be easily transmitted through the oral or written reproduction of Victor’s story. Their transmission seems inevitable; therefore, what is at stake is preventing the readers from internalizing them as desired models. To do so, Shelley alienated the monster and its creator and quarantined them in order to prevent their spread. In the meantime, she asks people, like Walton, to distance themselves from them.

Indeed, Shelley’s *Frankenstein* encourages readers to rethink the value of self-distancing and quarantine to combat the contagious coronavirus, especially as experts hold that it may take a long time to discover the appropriate vaccination to combat the coronavirus. Even when the vaccines were made available to the public, people were always reminded that vaccines only boost their immune systems to alleviate infection symptoms. In the time of the current pandemic, managing exposure to virtual and real diseased spots can effectively mitigate the physical and psychological consequences of the lockdowns, in addition to the circulation of nerve-racking stories and images about the skyrocketing infection rates and overworked medical and health services.

### **Contagion management**

Shelley decided to alienate and “other” the metaphorical plague of Victor Frankenstein and his monster to prevent their transmission and reproduction. Our argument here rests on the premise that relegating the monster and virus as foreign is deployed to contain their spread and reproduction. They are depicted as un-homely intruders, strangers and enemies that, because of their disruptive nature, have violated the order of things and imposed a serious ontological threat to humanity. By defining them in such a way, observers are motivated to inculcate a reaction against the plagues and execute sanitation precautions such as self-distancing and observing lockdown and stay-at-home orders and measures.

A postcolonial perspective can help us understand the function of othering Frankenstein’s monster and the coronavirus. The discourse of “Otherness” is a colonial rhetoric invented by the western colonizer to define itself and emphasize its difference from the Eastern “Other.” This discourse dominates earlier accounts of the coronavirus pandemic, especially those made by politicians. Echoing the Orientalists’ imaginative presumptions on the essentially “sickly Orient” (Varlik 2017, 60) the novel coronavirus has been alleged to be a Chinese product<sup>2</sup>. This racial profiling of the virus serves the same function of orientalism that Edward Said explicates in his seminal book *Orientalism*; to sustain borders between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In the context of pandemics, Varlik (2017) maintains that establishing these “epidemiological borders” between the Orient and the Occident can be understood as attempts to “identify the European

difference—a plague-free healthscape, hence a ‘civilized’ society. On the other hand, [...] facilitate [...] the legitimization of sanitary policies and the imposition of technologies for infectious disease-control” (68). Indeed, scholarly explorations of the implications and consequences of Orientalizing the coronavirus show how this discourse has affected racist and anti-Chinese sentiments.<sup>3</sup>

With regard to Frankenstein’s monster, there is an emphasis on its imperfect, foreign, and alien nature. Therefore, the monster cannot join the DeLacey family and Safie, regardless of its numerous attempts to win their intimacy and compassion. Captain Walton believes that the physical deformity of the monster signals its foreign, non-European origin. The monster, unlike Victor or Walton the “European,” is seemingly “a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island” (Shelley 2012, 58). In this domain, critics argue that the physical profile of the monster underpins its racial and ethnic difference. In “*Frankenstein*, Racial Science, and the Yellow Peril,” Anne Mellor demonstrated, “This creature is not white skinned, not blonde haired, not blue eyed. He is not Caucasian. He is not of the same race as his maker, Victor Frankenstein, who, as opposed to the creature, ‘lies white and cold in death’” (2008, 2). The monster’s mysterious nature, besides its hideous shape, intimidates Victor, a thing we can read his following words:

I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. [. . .] His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriations only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips. (Shelley 2012, 83)

The racial profiling of the monster provides a frame to explain the monster’s behaviors and actions. At one point, Victor is baffled by the unbelongingness of the monster. The monster has a “gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity” (Shelley 2012, 99). The creature’s deformity seemingly has nothing to do with its racial difference. Rather, it results from its biological imperfection. The monster constitutes a conundrum in the medical sense that is difficult to understand. Victor stresses this notion that “the strange nature of the animal would elude all pursuit” (100).

Similarly, the official communication on the coronavirus in the United States of America and Europe has described it as “strange” and “foreign.” The virus has been called the “Chinese virus,” the “Wuhan virus” and the “Kung Flu” (Reny and Barreto 2020, 1). In tandem with animating this image, militarized rhetoric has mediated the communication between officials and the public over the pandemic. For instance, President Donald Trump’s communication, according to Benjamin R. Bates, deploys the “war metaphor” (2020, 2) as a tool to explain the pandemic and underpin the state’s efforts to counter it. The effectiveness of this metaphor in conveying the hidden message depends on the receiver’s recognition of its “entailments” and associations. Bates argued,

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In comparing his government's efforts to counter SARS-CoV-2 to a war, the metaphor of WAR creates a series of entailments for the metaphor to be completed. Because metaphors demand cognitive and affective associations, metaphors encourage the auditor to attend not only to the definition of this struggle—this struggle is a WAR—but also to what else a WAR requires. (4)

The metaphor of war brings about various “entailments” such as “enemy,” “soldier,” “victory” and “sacrifice” (Bates 2020, 5). The word “enemy” also conjures other associations; “enemy is an aggressor,” “enemy is monstrous” and “enemy is foreign” (5). The alienation of the virus as the enemy and external threat to the nation against which quick and efficient measures must be executed, no matter how limitations and costs they affect.

Medically speaking, the virus' foreignness stems from the lack of transparent and substantiated information on its nature and lifeline. The virus has been turning into several mutations and variants, such as Alpha, Beta, Delta, Omicron and the “recombinant” “Frankenstein” variant. These mutations have made it difficult for epidemiologists to make generalist and inclusive statements on the coronavirus, like other viruses. Medical experts believe that “as long as the coronavirus spreads through the population, mutations will continue to happen, and the delta variant family continues to evolve” (Bollinger et al. 2022). Also, it has become evident that those variants differ in their aggressiveness, transmissibility, and resistance to the vaccine. Later genetic mutations of the virus Alpha, beta, gamma, and delta were found to be “more likely to cause severe disease, evade diagnostic tests, or resist antiviral treatment” (Bollinger et al. 2022). The delta variant of the virus that was first identified in India in December 2020, as an expert put it, is the most infectious and lethal (Doucleff 2021).

In addition, the process of alienating and othering the coronavirus can be read and understood as an attempt to transfer or alienate failure itself. Victor's experiment absolutely went wrong or intentionally failed to underpin its un-Englishness. The experiment's product, the monster, is racially othered because it is imperfect, lethal, atrocious, and uncivilized. As for the coronavirus, following its man-made hypothesis, its failure is evident, resonating with Victor's experiment in its imperfect, wild and monstrous nature that ravages our beloved. Contrary to what Žižek aimed at, tagging the pandemic as an “Other” debilitates the claims on its natural evolution and instead bolsters the speculations on its human engineering.

However, the fact that the coronavirus pandemic, or plagues in general, does not differentiate between the east and west by transgressing all geographical, epidemiological, and racial boundaries challenges the very epistemological basis of the racist discourse that attempted to explain the origin of the virus. Indeed, the current pandemic, according to Žižek, has posed another reality that has brought ‘us’ and ‘them’ together. The pandemic has urged the international community to collaborate and blur borders of any sort, a thing Žižek illustrated as a “much more beneficent ideological virus will spread and hopefully infect us: the virus of thinking of an alternate society, a society beyond the nation-state, a society that actualizes itself in the forms of global solidarity and cooperation” (39). Alternatively, enemies or others are not necessarily external or foreign, but they can be domestic and amongst us, as the pandemic makes it evident, dismantling any imaginative distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The claim

that the physical profile of the monster matches species other than European ones is dubious. *Frankenstein* demonstrates that the monster is a domestic product engineered by a scientist who is also treated as an “Other,” not English. Likewise, the coronavirus might be an external import. Nonetheless, it is domestically reproduced and disseminated. The coronavirus pandemic has made it clear that we are all in the same boat, and that requires coordination and collaboration in supporting the measures implemented to manage the transmission of the pandemic, which hopefully leads to the disappearance of the virus.

As Captain Walton decided to distance himself from the contagious, risky models of Victor Frankenstein and the ancient Mariner when he announced that “I shall kill no albatross”, the new conditions introduced by the coronavirus pandemic decree that we adapt ourselves to these conditions by internalizing the marker “touch me not” (Žižek 2020, 1). We have to materially and mentally distance ourselves from contagious spots and counteract the transmission of infection. In other words, communication and contact need to be managed and regulated as the vigilant transmitters of the infection. Michael A. Peters maintained that the epistemology of the COVID-19 pandemic ascertains the fact that “the social repeats the biological: the virus exists as long as it can spread, otherwise it faces a natural burnout; successful isolation depends on the social responsibility of all citizens to self-isolate and respect the ethical principle that a population is only as healthy as its weakest link” (2021, 2). Likewise, Victor’s model is sustained as long as it is replicated as a frame narrative to define success and progress. *Frankenstein* shows how dangerous self-obsession, unregulated self-education and emulation are.

In the story, Victor talked extensively about the educational condition and educational styles and models he had been exposed to throughout his apprenticeship, part of which is his perusal of self-education and exposure to narratives that nurtured his imaginative impulses. To take precautions against any possible normalization of this model, Victor Frankenstein urged Captain Walton to listen and “learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example” (Shelley 2012, 80). To strengthen the readers’ resistance to Victor’s scientific pestilence, Shelley demonstrated that the cordon sanitaire that ensures the society’s psychological, physical, and social well-being is heavily reliant on preventing the pestilence’s reproduction, regeneration, or transmission. To do so, she, as we mentioned earlier, imposed failure on Victor’s scientific inquiry. If not, his success would become a grand narrative that normalizes overreaching and excess as desired models in the public imagination. This is implemented at the cost of pressing contextual imperatives such as scientific progress and improvement as well as critical sentiments such as human affection, companionship, sympathy and communication.

Readers can then tolerate Victor’s seemingly inhuman retreat from his concession to create the female fellow to the monster, though he is initially moved and enamored by his argument. The monster assured Victor: “I greatly need a friend who would have sense enough not to despise me as romantic, and affection enough for me to endeavor to regulate my mind” (Shelley 2012, 45-55). Precisely, the monster requests a female friend “with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being” (156). To win Victor’s approval and appease his fears, the monster promised him that if he created a female companion, they would exile, isolate, and self-quarantine themselves in the lands untrodden by

human beings. He made oaths that ““If you consent, neither you nor any other human being shall ever see us again; I will go to the vast wilds of South America. My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment”” (157).

The monster’s argument had moved Victor Frankenstein’s sympathies. However, Victor suppressed his “detrimental” passion and considered the inevitable threat the monster’s progenies will cause. He frankly disclosed it saying, “Shall I create another like yourself, whose joint wickedness might desolate the world” (Shelley 2012, 156). As Victor already acknowledged the undetectable and intractable nature of the monster, biologically speaking, his progenies would certainly be genetically variant and more complicated, biologically deformed and destructive. He admitted that has concerns about the following:

Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the dæmon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? I had before been moved by the sophisms of the being I had created; I had been struck senseless by his fiendish threats: but now, for the first time, the wickedness of my promise burst upon me; I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price perhaps of the existence of the whole human race. (Shelley, 2012, 174)

The monster possesses abnormal qualities that are unfamiliar to the creator and exceeds. Victor Frankenstein pondered: “a creature who could exist in the ice caves of the glaciers and hide himself from pursuit among the ridges of inaccessible precipices was a being possessing faculties it would be vain to cope with” (Shelley 2012, 158). Victor apparently distrusted the oaths of the monster, partly because he, as the monster’s creator, knew that no well-defined human-like paradigms monitor and regulate the monster’s behaviors and actions. This might help us understand the monster’s fate. It is exterminated by fire, and the monster turns into ashes which marks the absolute cleansing and erasure of traces and remains of the monster. Likewise, the successive mutations of the coronavirus have been baffling the researchers’ efforts to define it, and understand it, and therefore know the how-to deal with it. The coronavirus, resembling Victor’s monster, tries to deceive us each time we think that it finally comes to an end. We are experiencing what Victor feared would happen if he conceded the creation of a female partner to the monster; the emergence of more lethal variants of the coronavirus.

Shelley’s termination of Victor Frankenstein and his monster might be read as propagating anti-science sentiment that prioritizes moral and ethical order over progress and improvement. However, reading the novel during the time of the coronavirus compels current readers to reappraise such allegations. Meanwhile, the novel appeases the readers’ repulsive reactions toward the measures taken to combat the pandemic or limit its spread at least. Nowadays, decision-makers around the world, like Shelley back then, have been determined to enforce lockdowns, social distancing, stay-at-home orders and quarantine. To the public, these measures seem as bizarre and acute as they posed a serious threat to social integrity and cohesion, compassion, friendship, domestic affection, and communication, in addition

to pressures on the education and economic spheres around the world. However, the absence of any promises on the near medical termination of the coronavirus makes it necessary for the people to abide by quarantine and social distancing.

Žižek maintained that “the measures necessitated by an epidemic should not be automatically reduced to the usual paradigm of surveillance and control” (2020, 76). On the other side, as these procedures are believed to crumble social cohesion, the viral infection propels us to adopt other manifestations of social cohesion and integrate social and public efforts, which Žižek reiterates as the following: “not to shake hands and isolate when needed IS today’s form of solidarity” (77). In the time of social distancing, quarantine, and lockdowns imposed by the outbreak of the pandemic, new styles of life, such as telecommunication, distance learning, virtual communication, and social and individual accountability emerge as an alternative but inevitable way to halt the procreation of the coronavirus. In the meantime, people start to realize the importance of combating information technology literacy and improving the integration of technology and artificial intelligence. For example, lockdowns during the coronavirus pandemic have demonstrated that physical and financial efforts to run businesses can be minimized, and they have fostered people’s life resilience.

## **Conclusion**

Amidst the public confusion and lack of transparency prevailing during the coronavirus pandemic, plague literature has lent its hand to appease this confusion and provide the public with perspectives that might satisfy the readers’ thirst for relevant answers. As the pandemic continues to manifest itself till this moment (2022), the public might also wonder about any hopes of containing the virus. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has always been present in explicating and debating such concerns. Referencing the novel in the time of the pandemic sustains a “community” of interpretation and a line of thinking on the continuity of calamities as long as Victor Frankenstein, as a model of knowledge inquisition, keeps replicating itself. Labelling the coronavirus as a “Frankenstein virus” demands readers be predisposed to embrace a suspicious reading of the pandemic, a reading that might not resonate with scientific explanations. For those who have already read Victor Frankenstein, the coronavirus outbreak reveals yet another manifestation of humans’ excessive and overreaching scientific intervention. Tagging *Frankenstein* nowadays also demonstrates how the title has been an enduring sign of panic and doubt that haunt the minds and hearts. In the meantime, the novel lends its recipe for how to mitigate the consequences of the plague. Quarantine and self-distancing are effective methods of limiting the spread of plagues.

The coronavirus pandemic has not only re-enlivened the interest in reading *Frankenstein*’s perspective on the pursuit of science. It has also revealed how enduring the orientalist’s ethos is. Patronizing imaginative assumptions have shaped critical investigation into Victor’s monster’s racial background. The same presumptions have also permeated the coronavirus pandemic discourse. The monster and the virus have been depicted as the savage, uncivilized, monstrous and contagious Eastern ‘Other’. According to Shelley’s novel, the monster is not like his creator, Victor Frankenstein, the English Whiteman, while the monster’s “yellow” skin, according to Anne Mellor, identifies him with the

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“Mongolian race” (2001, 2). The novel coronavirus has been assigned to a particular racial group. Whether they are based on a critical interpretive reading of *Frankenstein* or on pragmatic political discourse, both cases highlight how the orientalist legacy continues to divide intellectual and political discourses. The sustenance of this orientalist ethos shows how chauvinistic and xenophobic sentiments still manifest distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in this assumingly global, borders-free world. Nonetheless, Shelley’s novel and the coronavirus pandemic ascertain one thing: the dangerous and reckless “Other” can be among “us.” Captain Walton assures the readers that Victor Frankenstein is “European.” Also, the domestic player or carrier of the coronavirus plays a major role in the rise in the number of infections caused by the coronavirus. From a different perspective, by representing the model of Victor Frankenstein as the “Other,” we argued that Shelley sought to contain it and prevent its reproduction. In the context of the pandemic, the same discourse, as some studies suggest, seeks to hone domestic efforts to contain the unknown enemy.

## فرانكشتاين: جائحة فيروس كورونا من منظور أدبي

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### الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تشكيل ماري شيلي لفرانكشتاين (أو بروميثيوس الحديث) لفهم القراء لوباء فيروس كورونا الجديد، وترى الدراسة أن إطلاق اللقب "فرانكشتاين الجديد" أو "فيروس فرانكشتاين" على الفيروس مستوحى من أوجه التشابه الخيالية بين رواية فيكتور فرانكشتاين وانخراطه بالتجربة العلمية والرواية التي تثار حول وباء فيروس كورونا؛ لذلك فإن الإشارة إلى فرانكشتاين في الوقت الحاضر تظهر الخوف والرعب الذي كان يطارد المخيلة العامة عند تفشي فيروس كورونا وتحولاته اللاحقة إلى أشكال أكثر فتكاً. وتكشف الدراسة أيضاً كيف تجعل الرواية قراءها أكثر عرضة للترويج لفرضية الهندسة البشرية والتلاعب بالفيروس التاجي، وكيف أن إدارة فرانكشتاين للعدوى من خلال تصويره "كالآخر" المتضمنة في وحش فيكتور تشجع القارئ على إدراك أهمية التدابير الوقائية مثل التباعد والبقاء في المنزل للتقليل من انتشار الفيروس لتعزيز الصحة النفسية والجسدية للأفراد والمجتمعات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جائحة فيروس كورونا، فرانكشتاين، مجتمعات التأويل، ماري شيلي، أدب الوباء، فهم القراء.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Many novels were being published at the time of the pandemic, such as Louise Erdrich's *The Sentence* (2021), Ali Smith's *Companion Piece* (2022), Isabel Allende's *Violeta* (2022) and Claire Pollard's *Delphi* (2022). These works recount the lives of people from different professions, and how they struggle to manage the new realities introduced by the pandemic.
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Politicians, President Donald Trump at the top of them, and other European officials openly accused China as the source of the coronavirus. In "The (In)Appropriateness of the WAR Metaphor in Response to SARS-CoV-2: A Rapid Analysis of Donald J. Trump's Rhetoric," Benjamin R. Bates provides an overview of Trump's deployment of the words "China" and "Chinese" in his press conference.
- <sup>3</sup> See Debanjan Banerjee et al. (2020) "The 'Othering' in Pandemics: Prejudice and Orientalism in COVID-19, Muhammad Shaban Rafi's (2020) "Language of COVID-19: Discourse of Fear and Sinophobia"

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