

Science, Identity and Cultural Memory in Frankenstein and “Still I Rise”

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Lib 316 Historical Contexts & Literature

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Due: 8/4/2025

The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ushered in an era of transformation through scientific and industrial revolutions (c. 1780-1900). These revolutions fundamentally altered society, redefining relationships between humanity, nature and progress across the globe. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) offers a haunting critique of these changes, portraying the ethical dangers of unchecked ambition and rationalism. In contrast, Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" (1978) directly confronts the lingering social and economic inequalities produced by these same historic changes, asserting dignity and resilience in the face of systemic oppression. Although, *Frankenstein* critiques the dehumanizing ambitions of scientific-industrial progress, and "Still I Rise" focuses on countering the social inequalities perpetuated by that same progress through poetic defiance, both works enrich cultural memory and identity by warning against unbridled rationalism and celebrating the human spirit and resilience.

Shelley's *Frankenstein* was born of the anxieties of the early Industrial Revolution, a period marked by rapid technological advancement and the growing influence of Enlightenment rationalism. This historical context is central to the novel's enduring resonance. As Dey (2023) observes, Shelley's narrative functions as "a romantic response to the mechanistic, dehumanizing ethos of industrial society." The Industrial Revolution promised human progress through scientific advancements, but it also generated widespread fear of social alienation and environmental disruption. Shelley channels this tension through Victor Frankenstein, whose obsession with transcending nature's boundaries mirrors society's uncritical embrace of innovation at the cost of humanity.

This ambivalence is apparent when Victor recalls his early ambitions: "So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein – more, far more, will I achieve: treading in the steps already

marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation” (Shelley, 1818/2022, Ch. 3). Victor’s rhetoric of exploration mirrors the colonial and industrial discourse of domination, treating nature as an object to be conquered rather than a partner to be respected. His language reveals an underlying moral blindness—he is so captivated by the prospect of progress that he fails to question its consequences. His language echoes the Enlightenment ideal of mastery over nature but also foreshadows his moral downfall. As Poorghorban and Taghizadeh (2024) note, the novel critiques “The Enlightenment’s faith in absolute knowledge by showing how its pursuit produces monstrosity—both literal and symbolic.” Shelley’s framing of Victor’s hubris highlights how unrestrained scientific progress threatens to unravel ethical obligation, leaving its creator alienated from his humanity.

In one of the novel’s most poignant scenes, the Creature recounts his self-education through reading *Paradise Lost* and Plutarch, saying, “I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me” (Shelley 1818/2022, Ch. 15). This literary allusion reveals the Creature’s intellectual depth and underscores his moral complexity. Far from a mindless monster, he becomes a mirror reflecting all of society’s cruelty and Victor’s negligence.

Shelley’s depiction of the Creature further dramatizes the dehumanizing effects of rationalism. The Creature is more than a byproduct of Victor’s hubris and unbridled ambition; he is the embodiment of Enlightenment rationalism stripped of moral responsibility. His anguished narrative reveals the psychological consequences of being treated as an object rather than a subject: “I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on” (Shelley, 1818/2022, Ch. 24). This striking metaphor reflects his alienation—not only from his creator but also from the social world that refuses to see the humanity in him.

According to Dey (2023), the Creature “represents the sum of industrial society’s failures- disconnectedness, objectification, and emotional bankruptcy.” Poorghorban and Taghizadeh (2024) further this thought by arguing that the Creature’s suffering forces readers to confront “the moral blind of an Enlightenment project that prioritizes knowledge acquisition over ethical care.” Thus, Shelley’s use of Gothic horror becomes more than a stylistic choice; it functions as an ethical commentary on the dehumanizing potential of scientific-industrial progress, and the price it holds for humanity.

Both Shelly and Angelou rely on genre-specific techniques to enhance their social critiques. Shelley’s use of Gothic conventions- such as layered narratives, sublime natural imagery, and grotesque horror- heightens the emotional and ethical stakes of Victor’s experiment. As literary critic Smith (2022) argues, Shelley “weaponizes the Gothic form to interrogate rationalism, using terror as a vehicle for moral reflection.” The sublime landscapes – icy mountains, stormy skies – stand in sharp contrast to Victor’s laboratory, further emphasizing the alienation that results from severing scienfic from nature.

In contrast, Angelou employs the cadences of oral tradition, using repetition and rhetorical questioning to create an anthem of resilience. Lines like “Does my sassiness upset you? / Why are you beset with gloom?” (Angelou, 1978, lines 5-6) confront the reader directly, collapsing the distance between poet and audience. Aulia et al. (2024) interpret this structure as “mimetic of Black oral traditions, turning the poem into a communal call-and-response of defiance.” Through these devices, Angelou transforms private pain into a public declaration of empowerment and resistance against erasure.

Shelley’s novel persists in cultural memory because it serves as an ethical touchstone for debates about progress. The name “Frankenstein” has transcended its literary origins, becoming

shorthand for the dangers of creating without accountability. This cultural resonance extends into contemporary debates about bioethics, artificial intelligence, and genetic engineering, where “Frankenstein” serves as a cautionary metaphor for the perils of unregulated innovation (Dey, 2023). As Dey (2023) also points out, *Frankenstein* “anticipates the moral dilemmas of modern bioethics, artificial intelligence, and genetic engineering.” This enduring relevance reflects its dual function as both a product of its time and a warning to future generations. Shelley’s use of Gothic genre conventions – fragmented narratives, sublime imagery, and emotional intensity- preserves a cultural narrative that human progress without moral grounding can easily become monstrous and have unforeseen consequences. As Poorghorban and Taghizadeh (2024) note, the story’s true power lies in its ability to adapt “to each generation’s ethical dilemmas, preserving a Romantic warning for a technocratic age.”

Conversally, Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise” (1978) works to confront the social fallout of the very same revolutions. Industrial capitalism not only transformed economies, but also entrenched systemic inequalities, particularly for marginalized communities. Angelou’s poem responds to this with poetic defiance, reclaiming dignity for those who had long been subjugated by racial, economic, and gendered oppression. As Aslam (2021) notes, Angelou’s verse “articulates collective healing and cultural identity through resilience, turning personal suffering into communal triumph.”

Angelou’s use of direct, repetitive language - “You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I’ll rise” - symbolizes resilience as a force of nature. Her allusions to wealth and femininity - “Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells / Pumping in my living room” (lines 7-8)- reclaim symbols of power historically denied to Black women. These lines redefine cultural identity by asserting value in spaces where it has been systematically denied. Aulia et al. (2024) interpret

this imagery as a form of mimetic resistance, “reflecting Black America’s perseverance in the face of ongoing marginalization.” Through its rhythmic cadences and confrontational tone, the poem transformed defiance into a celebration of survival, offering an anthem for collective empowerment, it is a battle cry.

Angleou’s poem contributes to cultural memory by transforming centuries of suffering into a narrative of triumph. It asserts a collective identity rooted in survival and dignity, countering narratives that reduce Black experience to that of victimhood. Aslam (2021) observes that “Angelou reframes cultural trauma as a source of agency, allowing marginalized communities to claim ownership over their histories.” This act of reclamation aligns with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s warning against “the danger of a single story,” resisting reductive narratives by insisting on complexity and resilience.

Though Shelley and Angelou write in different genres and contexts, both works shape cultural memory by challenging dominant narratives of their respective eras. Shelly warns against the ethical void of uncritical progress, while Angelou asserts humanity in the face of historic erasure. Together, they offer a cultural narrative about industrial modernity” one that cautions against cold rationalism and celebrates resilience as an act of resistance against oppression. Their dual legacies remind readers that progress must be tempered with accountability, and that cultural identity emerges not from innovation but from survival and reclamation. By continuing to resonate in classrooms, cultural discourse, and political rhetoric, both pieces demonstrate literature’s unique power to preserve memory and shape identity across generations.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise” demonstrate how literature preserves cultural memory and identity while reflecting on the complexity of historical change. Shelley critiques the ethical failures of the scientific-industrial revolution, while Angelou

responds to its enduring social inequities with poetic defiance. Both works challenge on-dimensional narratives, transforming cultural trauma into lessons of responsibility and resilience. In doing so, they offer a vital reminder for their readers.; progress without humanity is hollow, but resilience in the face of oppression can redefine cultural identity for generations to come.

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