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Bodies, Beliefs, and Bondage: Individual Experience and the Exposure of British Institutional Violence in Romantic Literature

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*‘Shall Britain, where the soul of Freedom reigns,
Forge chains for others she herself disdains?’*

(Hannah More, *Slavery: A Poem*)

If we consider the Romantic period as beginning with the French Revolution in 1789, and ending sometime in the 1830's - perhaps an oversimplification, but 'not terribly misleading' in concordance with Michael Ferber's periodisation - it coincides almost precisely with the historical arc of transatlantic slavery in Britain: from its ubiquitous practise, to growing opposition, and ultimately to its abolition - first in the country itself in 1807, and later across its colonies in 1833 (Ferber, 15). The Slave Trade's transition from a conventionalised institution, to a morally and politically contested one during the Romantic period, means that even texts which did not explicitly address slavery, were inevitably shaped by its presence within cultural consciousness. Britain's eventual abolition of slavery in 1833 emerged from a culture in which slavery had long been materially and institutionally embedded; as David Richardson notes, by 1670 Britain had established its dominance in the Atlantic slave trade, becoming the pre-eminent slave-trading power in the Western hemisphere (440). This commercial supremacy meant that slavery was not merely an overseas practice but a structural element of life in Britain. Indeed, Brycchan Carey and Sara Salih argue that throughout 'the long eighteenth century' (1688-1832), slavery and the slave trade were 'inextricable from all facets of British culture and society', embedded in state structures, commercial regulation, finance, routine governance, and even the Church of England, allowing slave-produced commodities to circulate as ordinary business across the empire (1). Within such a deeply institutionalised system, abolitionist resistance emerged relatively late: as Paula E. Dumas observes, it was not until the early 1780s that abolition entered the formal political sphere, marked by the presentation of the first anti-slavery petition to Parliament in 1783 (10). Romantic texts therefore emerge from, and respond to, a cultural moment in which slavery was both structurally normalised yet increasingly contested, allowing literary works to illuminate the ideological fractures produced by Britain's slave economy. Focusing on three distinct authors – a liberated African slave and his English contemporaries – this essay

seeks to explore how individual experience in Romantic-era texts is utilised to interrogate, criticise, or in some cases inadvertently reinforce, the institution of slavery whether overtly, allegorically, or obliquely through Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* (1789); William Blake's 'The Little Black Boy' (1789); and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Whether one accepts Vincent Carretta's assertion that Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* is more fictionalised than autobiographical, with 'baptismal and naval records indicat[ing] that he was born in America rather than Africa' (8) or acknowledges that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is not explicitly concerned with the Transatlantic Slave Trade, reading these texts through the lens of slavery and empire not only uncovers the complexities of contemporary attitudes toward slavery, but also the ways in which literature became a site for negotiating identity, agency, and resistance within the broader discourse of empire and human rights during the Romantic period. Elizabeth Bohls asks, 'How could the Romantic literary imagination help to make sense of the increasingly wider world that Britain was exploring, mapping, trading with and colonising?' (10). This essay takes up that precise challenge by examining how the imaginative capacities of Romantic literature became a means to confront, and at times complicate, the realities of bondage and its enduring legacies, whilst also considering how these critiques were entangled with, and at times compromised by, prevailing ideologies of race, empire and Christianity.

Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* (1789) represents one of the earliest and most compelling testimonies of the Slave Trade – it propounds a personal and powerful account of enslavement, emancipation and self-redress, blending autobiography and discursive strategy to critique human subjugation and the inhumanity of the institutions that condone it. Born in Igbo, Equiano is kidnapped and sold into slavery at a young age, enduring harrowing conditions aboard slave ships and in colonial plantations: his first encounter with the slave ship is depicted with visceral intensity, as he recalls being 'soon

converted into terror which I am yet at a loss to describe' (55). Equiano's inability to articulate his horror, even in retrospect, underscores the unfathomability of his trauma. Certain that he 'had gotten into a world of bad spirits and that they were going to kill [him]', Equiano's early perception of enslavement is steeped in fear and confusion, made all the more abhorrent by his extreme youth, and consequent vulnerability (55). Equiano's interpretation of his captors as supernatural entities significantly carries an implicit irony: Britain justified its colonial expansion through Enlightenment ideals of reason, civilisation, and progress, yet Equiano's experience is so incomprehensibly brutal that it can only be understood through imagery conventionally associated with the irrational. In doing so, the narrative exposes the contradiction between Britain's self-fashioning as a refined nation and the barbarity that underpinned its imperial enterprise. The extremity of Equiano's suffering is further emphasised by his confession that 'I now wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve me' (56). Equiano's personification of Death in this way, is particularly significant within the context of Britain's self-identification as a Christian nation, for it reveals the moral bankruptcy of a society whose professed commitment to charity and the sanctity of human life coexists with an institution so brutal that annihilation appears a more merciful fate than continued existence. Through the dynamism of his narrative, Equiano succeeds in lending, as he himself notes, 'fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery' (61).

Equiano's emancipation, 'I who had been a slave in the morning, trembling at the will of another, now became my own master... completely free' (137), is framed as a triumph of not only immense personal resilience, but of divine providence and moral enlightenment: 'I regard myself as a particular favourite of heaven, and acknowledge the mercies of providence in every occurrence of my life' (31). His insistence that his freedom is the product of 'the mercies of providence' relocates authority from the slaveholder to God, implying that liberty is an inherent, divinely ordained condition rather than one contingent upon human ownership.

In doing so, Equiano exposes the profound contradiction of a Christian empire that presumed the right to claim dominion over lives that only ever belonged to God. Yet his declaration of becoming his 'own master' is equally revealing: even in the moment of emancipation, freedom is articulated through the lexicon of slavery, suggesting that the institution has so profoundly shaped his consciousness that its language remains the primary means through which he can conceive of liberty. The legacy of enslavement thus persists beyond physical bondage, leaving an enduring imprint upon both identity and expression.

The text transcends the typical slave narrative by weaving in extensive digressions on economic theory, religious doctrine, and natural history. In his concluding chapter, for instance, he outlines an economic 'theory founded upon facts' asserting that slavery's termination would not hinder economic progress, but rather, enhance it: 'the abolition of slavery will give a most rapid extension of manufacturers, which is totally and diametrically opposite to what some interested people assert' (234-235). These insightful strategies seek to establish the intellectual credibility, rationality and humanity of Equiano, before the assessing gaze of his predominantly white, and literate, readership. Similarly, the frontispiece of *The Interesting Narrative* is a telling artifact of Equiano's strategic self-representation (**Figure 1**). Pictured in the European dress of a Gentleman, seated with a book in hand, Equiano appears as the model of rational dignity, appealing to the values of respectability and civility that his readers would recognise and admire. This visual rhetoric is a calculated move to disrupt the dominant iconography of Blackness associated with primitiveness, servitude, and irrationality. By appropriating the aesthetic and intellectual codes through which eighteenth-century Britain authorised knowledge and respectability, Equiano subverts prevailing constructions of Blackness. Yet the necessity of this performance also exposes the epistemic limits of abolitionist discourse, for his humanity becomes intelligible only when mediated through the cultural values of the society that had denied it.

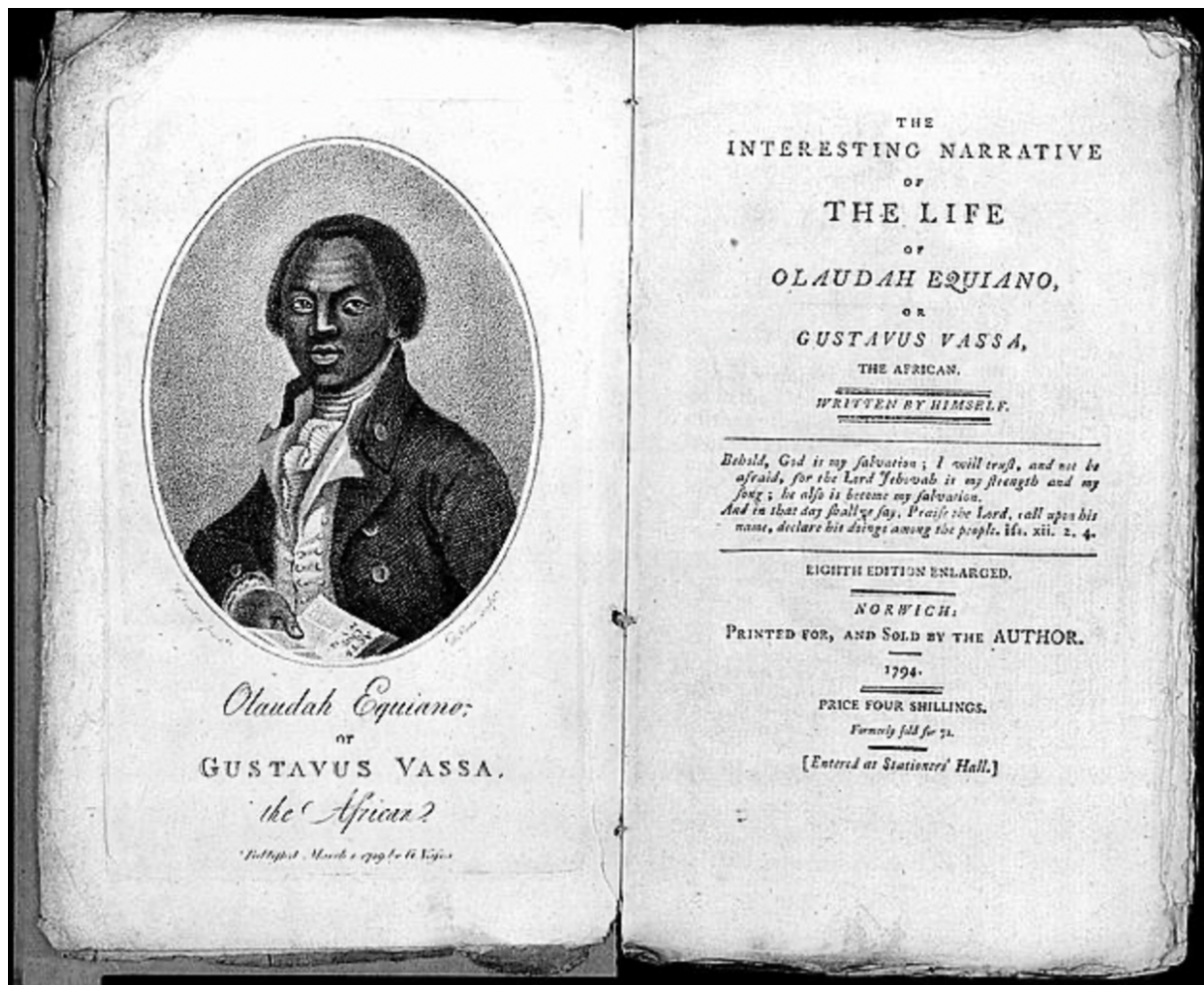


Figure 1: Frontispiece and title page: *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano*. Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/98501896/>.

Equiano's embrace of Christianity is central to the text's structure and persuasive power: he constructs his personal redemption story within a Christian framework, narrating how his faith enabled him to endure suffering and develop a moral compass aligned with British values. However, this religious conversion is not presented merely as spiritual growth; it becomes a political tool, one that allows Equiano to appeal to the moral conscience of his readers. By aligning himself with Christian ethics, he exposes the glaring contradiction between the gospel of universal love and the reality of racialised enslavement utilising Christian rhetoric directly in his address:

‘O, ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God? who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?’ (61)

The exclamatory apostrophe immediately establishes an accusatory tone, while the adjective ‘nominal’ strips his audience of their claimed religious identity, suggesting they are Christians in name alone rather than in practice. Equiano's rhetorical question, ‘learned you this from your God?’, is deeply ironic: rather than positioning himself as spiritually inferior, he assumes the moral authority to interrogate his readers' faith. This inversion of expected power relations undermines contemporary racial hierarchies by presenting the enslaved African as the true interpreter of Christian doctrine. Equiano exposes slavery as a corruption of genuine Christian principles, transforming scripture into evidence against the slave system and compelling his audience to judge themselves by the standards they claim to uphold. Yet this alignment is multifaceted: while it enables critique, it also reinscribes a colonial narrative wherein salvation—and by extension, civilised identity—can only be granted by Christian and implicitly white, culture.

Even as Equiano condemns slavery, he occasionally reaffirms the very hierarchies he seeks to dismantle. The description of his ‘uncommonly rich and fruitful’ homeland at the beginning of his narrative is significant, as it frames his life in Africa as both prosperous and idyllic, establishing a paradisaal image that contrasts sharply with the horrors he later recounts (37). However, Equiano filters these reflections through a Western lens. For instance, he refers to the practice of circumcision, noting that it is ‘*like the Jews*’, and at one point he challenges the European reader by asserting, ‘let the haughty European recollect that his ancestors were once, like the Africans, uncivilised and even barbarous’ (41, my italics; 45). While this statement aims to critique European notions of superiority, it inadvertently

reinforces them, by implying that Africans, in comparison to Europeans, are less civilised. Moreover, his journey from enslaved African to respected British subject can be read as a narrative of assimilation, one that inadvertently reinforces the notion that Black individuals must attain exceptional moral and intellectual standards to be deemed worthy of freedom. This tension—between agency and accommodation—is central to understanding how Equiano’s personal experience is employed to interrogate social institutions, but also how it is shaped by them. As Ronald Paul notes, Equiano’s narrative offers an ‘insight into the psychopathology of race,’ and his work ultimately reveals how race and identity are negotiated through the interplay of resistance and complicity (863). This psychological tension has also been explored by Franz Fanon, who argues that the colonised subject internalises the inferiority imposed upon them by colonial systems, often leading them to desire assimilation into the coloniser’s culture. Fanon contends, ‘The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white’ (178). Equiano’s emphasis on conversion, literacy, and moral refinement allow him to position himself as a rational and worthy subject deserving of freedom. However, this strategy also risks suggesting that dignity and humanity must be demonstrated through proximity to European values rather than being inherent. In this context, Equiano’s efforts to gain freedom, respect, and moral authority within British society can be read as part of a larger psychological struggle in which he seeks to align himself with the values of his colonisers. Yet, as Fanon suggests, this desire for assimilation is fraught with tension, as it requires the colonised individual to both challenge and ultimately adopt the very structures that have subjugated them: ‘The goal of his behaviour will be the Other (in the guise of the white man), for the Other alone can give him worth’ (119). The narrative thus emerges as a complex interplay between experience and institution; it reveals not only literature’s capacity to challenge social institutions, but also the ways in which those challenges are compromised by

the need to survive and be heard within those very systems. The result is a layered and often ambivalent critique—one that mirrors the tangled legacies of slavery itself.

These abounding complications are also evident in William Blake's 'The Little Black Boy' from his *Songs of Innocence* (1789). It is a deceptively simple lyric poem that uses the experience of a Black child to complicate the theological and racial hierarchies that underpin eighteenth-century colonial ideology. The poem has often been dismissed as a product of racial stereotyping, largely due to lines such as 'And I am Black, but O my Soul is White!', and the poem's closing hope to 'be like him, and then he will love me', which are accused of reinforcing the colonialist value of whiteness as an aspirational state (line 2; line 28). The poem has prompted significant scholarly debate, with Elizabeth Bohls acknowledging its interpretative ambiguity and ultimately concluding that 'Blake does not make it easy for the reader to decide' (65-66). Yet when Blake's imagery, speaker, and accompanying engraved plates are centred, the poem emerges as a censure of the religious frameworks used to justify slavery. Blake exposes subtly how innocence and spirituality are manipulated by social institutions to uphold systems of racial oppression. The setting of the 'southern wild', often imagined in colonial discourse as a site of savagery and spiritual darkness, is here reimagined as the backdrop for revelation and piety (line 1). This visual gesture inverts racial hierarchies and subtly elevates African identity as spiritually perceptive rather than deficient.

In a context where enslaved families were often forcibly separated, the depiction of a nurturing, present mother—'she took me on her lap and kissed me' - directly challenges colonial portrayals of Black women as 'deviant and dangerous' (Blake, line 7; Altink, 65). This mother figure imparts a religious philosophy that encourages resilience: 'We are put on earth a little space, / That we may learn to bear the beams of love' (lines 13-14). Jonathan Perris reads this maternal instruction as doubly tragic, suggesting the mother, having already undergone colonial contact, understands the horrors of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and thus

offers a form of theological comfort to psychologically prepare her son for inevitable dehumanisation (637). Her teachings, therefore, may not reflect conviction but a survival mechanism—an internalised ideology designed to help her child endure in a world where his identity will be weaponised against him. Here, innocence is not protected but pre-emptively compromised, and the child is indoctrinated into a theology shaped by white supremacy.

The recurring image of the sun within the poem - associated with God's presence and love—functions as a literal and metaphorical vehicle. The child says, 'White as an angel is the English child, / But I am black as if bereaved of light' (lines 3-4). However, the child is not bereft of light but, rather, accustomed to it—his blackness becomes not a symbol of exclusion but of endurance, having borne the 'beams of love' more wholly than his white counterpart (line 14). As John S. Mbiti notes, in many African societies 'the sun is considered to be a manifestation of God Himself', and this concept underpins Blake's subtle reclaiming of Blackness as spiritually proximate rather than estranged (52). This becomes unequivocal through Blake's positioning of the black child as spiritually mature and closer to God than the white child — in the poem's conclusion, the speaker offers to 'shade him from the heat till he can bear / To lean in joy upon our Father's knee' (lines 25-26) . Thus, while society views blackness as a mark of sin or separation from God, the poem reconfigures it as a sign of divine proximity. This powerful reversal, moreover, sees the black child acting as a spiritual guide, mediating God's love for the white child—suggesting that the very institutions which claim spiritual superiority (British Christianity, imperial doctrine) are in fact entirely distanced from divine truth.

The engraved plates accompanying 'The Little Black Boy' further visualise Blake's condemnation. The tree beneath which the mother teaches in Plate 9 (**Figure 2**) is full and lush, symbolic of flourishing spiritual insight, in stark contrast to the sparse and more barren vegetation of the heavenly landscape in Plate 10 (**Figure 3**). This visual contrast implies that

the fullness of spiritual understanding is not deferred to a heavenly afterlife, one to which the white child aspires, but is pre-existent within the 'southern wild' (line 1). Plate 10 shows the black child standing, while the white child kneels—possibly in prayer, but also arguably in penitence. The image invites us to consider that Blake is not envisioning an equal spiritual afterlife, but a rebalancing of power, where the once-oppressed acts as an intercessor between the privileged and the divine. In Plate 9, the mother is depicted in a robe resembling that of Christ in Plate 10, blurring the line between earthly and divine authority and attributing spiritual authority to African figures. This visual parallel challenges evangelical pro-slavery discourse by suggesting that enslaved individuals embody the very virtue that such rhetoric claims they lack - revealing the ideological incoherence of using Christian values to justify their oppression.

Perris extends this reading further, arguing that Plate 10 is not a celebration of racial harmony, but a visual manifestation of evangelical contradiction (638-639). The Little Black Boy, having absorbed fragments of Christian faith, finds himself caught between African religiosity and European Christianity—unable to return to the pastoral Eden of Plate 9, yet excluded from fully participating in the imagined Christian heaven of Plate 10 (638).

Notably, Perris asserts that a visual separation is maintained between the black child and the entwined figures of Christ and the English boy; while the latter two mirror each other in posture and presence, the black child is awkwardly placed, half-turned toward the viewer, hand extended to stroke the boy's 'silver hair' —a gesture of tenderness, perhaps, but also of alienation (Blake, line 27; Perris 638-639). This dissonance reveals the tragic irony of the child's condition: he does not recognise his displacement. His language, marked by grammatical oddities— 'joy' used as a verb, the absence of the 'the' in 'little English boy' - emphasises his naivety and his incomplete assimilation into either religious system (line 26; line 22). Like Equiano, who is consumed by Christianity, the child becomes unmoored from

his African roots, which have now been reduced to the vague 'southern wild' (line 1). In the end, he is not redeemed by empire's faith but estranged by it—his spiritual clarity compromised in the very act of becoming a vessel for white salvation.



Figure 2: Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence: The Little Black Boy* (copy Y), plate 9. 1825. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/347906>



Figure 3: Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence: The Little Black Boy* (copy Y), plate 10. 1825. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/347907>

Although slavery had officially ended in Britain by the time Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* (1818), the novel's exploration of otherness reveals how systems of marginalisation remained embedded in societal discourse. Though ostensibly a Gothic tale of scientific hubris and monstrous creation, the novel offers a profound meditation on the social construction of exclusion and institutionalised injustice. Its thematic preoccupations with bodily dominion, dispossession and the yearning for recognition - 'my heart yearned to be known and loved' (123) - embody conditions analogous to those experienced by the enslaved and therefore invite comparison. Such parallels are not arbitrary, for Gothic fiction and racialised discourse emerged from, and responded to, overlapping cultural anxieties, surrounding foreignness, empire and the classification of certain bodies as inferior or threatening. As Howard Malchow argues, the Gothic sensibility developed alongside 'the brutal progress of European nationalism and imperialism,' becoming shaped by the same conflicts that informed colonial thought (3). Indeed, Gothic literature's fascination with 'themes and images meant to shock and terrify' and its emphasis on 'suspense and threat' resonate with nineteenth-century discourses of racial prejudice, imperial exploration, and the construction of the threatening Other (Malchow, 5). Reading *Frankenstein* alongside histories of slavery therefore does not reduce the novel to an exclusively abolitionist text, but rather reveals the wider applicability of Romantic critiques of oppression: while Equiano and Blake expose the racial and religious ideologies underpinning enslavement, Shelley examines the more extensive institutional processes through which difference becomes a basis for exclusion.

The Creature is consistently denied a name, kinship, legal personhood, and protection—rights determined and policed by social institutions. His own self-description as a 'slave,' possessing 'no money... no property', foregrounds his awareness of social disenfranchisement and positions him within the language of colonial subjugation (111).

Moreover, Shelley's superhuman physicality of the Creature, who can traverse perilous landscapes with ease: 'bounded over crevices in the ice, among which [Frankenstein] had walked with caution', and is able to bear 'the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to [his] frame' parallels the rhetoric used by apologists for West Indian slavery who claimed that the Black man possessed 'more brute strength than the white man and could stand the heat of the Tropics which would enervate, perhaps kill, a European' (Shelley 89; 111; Malchow, 19).

Furthermore, the Creature's bodily abnormality: 'its gigantic stature', alongside its 'superhuman speed', 'distorted proportions', and immeasurable strength: 'I could have torn him limb from limb as the lion rends the antelope' – renders him irredeemably other (64; 89; 201; 126-127). As Allan Lloyd Smith observes, Shelley positions the Creature within a racialised imaginary, one rooted in Enlightenment-era physiognomy, where physical difference was read as moral and intellectual inferiority (210). It is precisely these visible differences that preclude the Creature's integration, despite his eloquence and exhibited morality. This exclusion is compounded by his liminal existence. Like the enslaved within Western modernity, the Creature's form is constantly scrutinized and laden with symbolic meaning, yet his voice, agency, and interiority are systematically denied or ignored. Marie Mulvey-Roberts reads *Frankenstein* as a parable of the slave life cycle: the Creature, like the enslaved, is brought into being for the purposes of another's ambition, denied autonomy, and then demonised for seeking justice (53). When Victor refuses to create a mate for the Creature, his rationale echoes colonial anxieties about miscegenation and uncontrollable reproduction: He fears, in his own words, 'a race of devils' (160)—a phrase that, as Brantlinger notes, evokes the literature of colonial rebellion, especially fears of slave insurrections like Haiti (140).

Howard Malchow identifies how Gothic fiction and racist discourse both exploit fears of contamination, hybridity, and moral degeneration, arguing that they 'manipulate deeply

buried anxieties' surrounding 'the chaos beyond natural and rational boundaries' (5). Both forms, he suggests, construct the threatening Other through fears of 'contamination' and the destruction of the 'simple and pure' by the 'poisonously exotic' (5). The Creature, as a constructed being, is the ultimate hybrid—neither fully human nor fully monstrous, thereby provoking anxieties around the collapse of supposedly stable boundaries: scientific, racial, sexual. His rejection from society therefore reflects not an inherent monstrosity, but the projection of cultural fears onto a body marked as other. This anxiety is perhaps most vividly expressed in William Frankenstein's accusation: 'you wish to eat me and tear me to pieces', an echo of the 'presumed cannibal impulse' that Malchow locates in colonial constructions of Black savagery (Shelley, 134; Malchow 41). Yet the Creature defies this stereotype, asserting his peaceful nature: 'I do not destroy the lamb... acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment' (137-138). Through the Creature's experience, Shelley critiques the way racial and colonial ideologies, rooted in social institutions, demonise the 'Other' based on fear rather than understanding.

Significantly, *Frankenstein* does not end with the Creature's definitive death. Instead, he disappears into 'darkness and distance,' a periphery that is neither death nor resolution (216). This open ending resists the narrative impulse to contain or eliminate the Other. It instead suggests that the Creature's suffering—and by extension, the injustices he represents—remain unresolved, as an indictment of the society that created and ostracised him. In a literary culture that often resolves otherness through destruction or assimilation, Shelley's choice to leave the Creature's fate ambiguous serves as a protest against erasure, by framing survival itself as a form of resistance.

Across Equiano's testimony of enslavement, Blake's exploration of racialised innocence, and Shelley's Gothic representation of exclusion, individual experience becomes a means through which Romantic literature exposes the processes by which institutions

construct, justify, and perpetuate forms of inequality. Together, these narratives reveal a broader Romantic concern with the instability of categories—human and inhuman, civilised and savage, belonging and exclusion—that were central to imperial and racial ideologies. While Equiano and Blake expose these tensions within explicitly racial and religious contexts, Shelley extends them into the Gothic realm, demonstrating how the structures that produce the Other operate across different forms of social marginalisation. None of these texts offer an unassailable or consistent resistance to the oppressions they depict, their critiques are shaped—and occasionally compromised—by the prevailing ideologies of their age. Yet it is precisely this tension that gives them their enduring power: they do not merely reject the colonial systems they depict but reveal the complexities of operating within them, collectively exposing the fractures in empire's conduct, by framing individual experience as a method to confront the moral failures of social institutions.

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