Strangers and Orphans: Knowledge and mutuality in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

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**Abstract**

Paulo Freire consistently upheld humanization and mutuality as educational ideals. This article argues that conceptualizations of knowledge and how knowledge is sought and produced play a role in fostering humanization and mutuality in educational contexts. Drawing on Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein*, this article focuses on the two central characters who ‘ardently’ pursue knowledge at all costs. It will be argued that the text suggests two possible outcomes from the pursuit of knowledge. One is mutuality; the other is social disconnectedness.

**Keywords:** Freire, knowledge, humanization, education

If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful. (Shelley, 1831/1994, p. 37)

**Introduction**

In her introduction to the 1831 edition of her novel *Frankenstein*, Shelley notes that invention ‘does not consist of creating out of void, but out of chaos’ (1831/1994, p. 195). The assertion that knowledge is produced in context and in relationship to other (albeit disparate) ideas forms the central premise of this article. This article explores the possibilities of literary and philosophical intersections for the study of education, focusing on knowledge and knowledge production. The philosophical dimensions come from the work of educational philosopher Paulo Freire, specifically his arguments about the social nature of knowledge and its relationship to humanization and the development of mutuality. I will explore how *Frankenstein* might be read as a novel that asks fundamental questions about the nature of desirable knowledge and its effects on human relationships. I argue that knowledge has the potential for community, mutuality and connectivity, but also the potential to make us strangers to ourselves and to each other. If education is to be a vehicle for humanization and
mutuality, then education must be informed by a theory that presupposes a view of knowledge as (1) having an incomplete and/or uncertain endpoint, and (2) emerging from the lives and experiences of learners, making the everyday strange and worthy of pursuit.

In the first section of the article, I will provide an outline of Freire’s key understandings of humanization and knowledge. In particular, I will focus on the social imperative that lies within his discussion of ontology and epistemology. It is the aim of this article to argue that in educational contexts theories of knowledge and knowledge production have a profound effect in enabling or disabling social connectivity. In the second section of the article, I will illustrate Freire’s ideas by exploring the contrasting conceptions of knowledge that Victor and the Creature hold. Consistent with Freire’s understanding, Shelley suggests that a view of knowledge that does not have a social and participatory aspect affects our ability to be connected to each other and the world. In the third section, I will consider the effects of each view of knowledge on Victor and the Creature’s ability to connect with others and identify with them.

I will conclude the discussion by briefly considering what this reading of the text might offer us in the context of the current education discourse. I will suggest that how we conceive of knowledge as well as how we produce it needs to be open to uncertainty and risk; it needs to focus on and affirm the place of experience and emotions in education. A view of knowledge that does not encompass this is limited in its ability to contribute to humanization and mutuality.

Critical Responses to *Frankenstein*

Responses to *Frankenstein* are both plentiful and broad in their range of interpretations. Some readings have focused on the Creature as representative of children and/or oppressed minorities (Behrent, 1990). These readings suggest that the novel is a type of manifesto for the vulnerable, a reminder that society is imbued with the responsibility to look after those who cannot exercise power or advocate for themselves. Others, like Mellor (1998), have provided feminist readings, viewing Victor’s creation as a treatise on domestic education. Yousef (2004) and Richardson (1994) have focused on Shelley’s engagement with dominant ideas at the time, namely, education and childhood. Their analyses of the text are considered *vis-à-vis* Rousseau and Locke, as well as the political writings of Shelley’s parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. Yousef and Richardson argue that Shelley does not merely replicate the educational thought of the time, but instead offers a critique of education. In general, these critiques view *Frankenstein* as a *Bildungsroman*, focusing on the education the Creature receives. Yousef and Richardson argue that Shelley aptly demonstrates the limits of eighteenth century thought by problematizing the education the Creature receives. Both Richardson and Yousef focus on the education of the Creature in relation to Rousseau’s *Emile*. Richardson suggests that the work of both Godwin and Wollstonecraft plays a key role in the text, denouncing education as a form of subjugation for those who are not in a position of power (Richardson, 1994), while Yousef (2004) suggests that Shelley illuminates the limits of eighteenth century thought on autonomy, by showing that it is relationships which ‘mark’ us as human.
beings. She argues that the Creature can never be seen by others as human because he is not related to anyone, the result of which is that he is never accepted or claimed by anyone. Similarly, Yousef reads the Creature’s non-existent childhood as a key indicator of Shelley’s belief in the importance of infancy and childhood as a required period of dependence in all our lives. In as much as the Creature has no childhood, argues Yousef, then he is not human (Yousef, 2004).

**The Novel**

In the story, a young man, Victor, desires both the ‘secret’ of life and the adulation that such knowledge would provide him. To this end, he dedicates months of his life to creating a being—one which would render him a creator. Upon finishing his ‘Creature’, Victor finds him unsightly and horrifying, rejects him immediately and flees back to his home and family. The Creature spends the rest of the story searching for his ‘father’ and attempting connection and community with others.

The novel is divided into four sections and is told by three narrators. The first and last sections are told by Walton, an explorer who meets both Frankenstein and the Creature while on his quest to reach the North Pole. The middle section is first told by Frankenstein and then by the Creature. In his section, Frankenstein recounts his childhood and interest in uncovering the ‘secret of life’. He relates his hunger for this knowledge and his horror at the conclusion of his experiment. The Creature then tells his story from his ‘birth’ to his journey into language and society.

**Humanization, Mutuality and Knowledge in Freire’s Work**

The central idea in Freire’s work is that humanization is our ontological vocation (Freire, 1998). In the first few pages of *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Freire (1996, p. 6) asserts this vocation, emphasizing the importance of dialogical relationships in advancing humanization and stating, ‘only through communication can human life have meaning’. This attention to the social runs through Freire’s writing and it informs both his ontological and epistemological frameworks. Freire saw humanization as a process that allows us to ‘gain coherence’ by ‘getting to know, engaging in solidarity with, as well as learning from one another’ (1998a, p. 45). For Freire, education has the potential to humanize or dehumanize. Humanization depends on dialogue and praxis; any educational context that does not allow for this means a potential for dehumanization. That is to say, both emancipation and oppression are possible outcomes for education. Two aspects of this understanding need to be stressed here: one is that humanization rests on social connectedness; the other is that solidarity is a pre-requisite to social change for a more socially just society.

As stated previously, Freire’s epistemology shares characteristics with his view of our ontology. In the same way that humanization is seen as a social and dialogical process, so too is knowledge. For Freire, knowledge is not so much an entity to be ‘obtained’ but a dynamic and incomplete process. In his words, ‘Knowledge has historicity. It never is, it is always in the process of being’ (Freire, 1998b, p. 31). If knowledge is always in the process of being, it also means that the outcome or endpoint of knowledge cannot always be known. Freire’s own work is illustrative of this important
point. Although Freire maintained a commitment to radical social change through education, he was never overly prescriptive about how this might come about. Arguing against any kind of ‘Freirean method’, he insisted that his work be challenged and held to the same scrutiny that he expected of all educational endeavours (Roberts, 2000). In this sense, knowledge requires a commitment to uncertainty and risk.

Freire also stresses the importance of engaging and connecting with the world, and making everyday experiences the focus of study. In his description of problem-posing education, Freire maintains that it is important for learners to consider their everyday experiences and conditions in a critical light. Questioning and problem posing allow learners to identify their personal issues in a wider context of power, seeing their oppression as something that is not a given but an imposed condition that can be changed (Freire, 1996). The position that Freire takes here illustrates the importance of personal experience as a worthy focus of study. It also signals his belief that critical engagement with the world is a necessary part of increasing self-awareness. The production of knowledge cannot happen in a manner that is disconnected from others and from the world. Freire insists throughout his work that it is ‘awareness of the world’ that makes ‘awareness of my/ourselves viable’ (Freire, 2004, p. 15). In as much as any knowledge is pursued without engaging with the world it will not lead to a connection with others, or even to a connection with oneself. In summary, Freire’s view of knowledge demands a dialogical engagement with others, a commitment to personal experience and a commitment to uncertainty and risk (or at least unknown outcomes) in education. If education is to play any emancipatory role then knowledge cannot perform any technical function in society that merely perpetuates the status quo. Nor can knowledge be an externally prescribed set of objectives where the outcome of said knowledge is known and/or disconnected from the lives and experiences of learners. Finally, it cannot be a private, individual pursuit.

Contrasting Conceptualizations of Knowledge and Knowledge Production

In *Frankenstein*, it is possible to draw a distinction between the ways in which the Creature and Victor conceptualize knowledge. I have organized the discussion in this section around four concepts of knowledge and knowledge production. I suggest that the first two—‘knowledge has a predetermined endpoint’ and ‘knowledge as a private, individual pursuit’—are generally at odds with Freire’s view of knowledge. The second two—‘knowledge as dialogical and uncertain’ and ‘knowledge as personal experience of the everyday’—resonate more strongly with Freire’s ideas. The first two are depicted largely by Victor and to a lesser extent Walton, the explorer. The second two are illustrated through the Creature’s search for ‘human knowledge’.

Knowledge has a Predetermined Endpoint

As Victor and Walton describe their search for knowledge and discovery they express a clear and confident sense of the endpoint or outcome of their pursuits. Both express their aspiration for knowledge in almost identical ways, emphasizing knowledge sought for personal status. Specifically, they desire to each be the ‘only one’ to have
discovered and contributed something to society. Although Walton and Victor pursue this at the expense of wealth and comfort—‘My life might have been passed in ease and luxury but I preferred glory’ (Walton; Shelley, 1831/1994, p. 7) and ‘Wealth was an inferior object; but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame’ (Victor; p. 23)—both are driven by the desire to ‘give’ something to all human kind in return for personal glory. Walton states that, ‘I shall satiate 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’ (p. 6) and that one cannot ‘contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation’ (p. 6). Victor echoes these same sentiments, yearning to be ‘the first’ to discover the secret of life. This view of knowledge suggests a one-way relationship between learner and knowledge. The role of the learner is to obtain the knowledge or make the discovery, and then pass it on to others. It is not to engage or reflect critically in any way. Neither Victor nor Walton considers any negative outcomes of their respective quests. There is no expectation that the outcome could be anything other than what they have imagined it to be.

Victor’s immediate, irremediable rejection of and disconnection from his creation, and his genuine shock and horror at the completion of his experiment, clearly signal his inability to have considered any other outcome than the one he had imagined in his head: ‘That I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe?’ (Shelley, 1831/1994, p. 38). It is of no surprise then, that he also does not consider the consequences of rejecting and abandoning the Creature. He never appears to ask: Has he left? Is he coming back? Is he waiting? What will happen to him now? Indeed, by page 42 of the novel, as far as his understanding will permit, the experiment is over.

**Knowledge as a Private, Individual Pursuit**

From early on in the novel it is clear that for Victor knowledge is something that is private, ‘secret’ and waiting to be discovered. Of his early interest in acquiring knowledge he says: ‘The world was to me a secret, which I desired to discover’ (Shelley, 1831/1994, p. 21) and that the things he learned ‘appeared to me treasures known to few but myself’ (p. 23) Unable to disclose his learning to his father (‘I often wished to communicate these secret stores of knowledge to my father’, p. 23) he chooses instead to share his discoveries with Elizabeth but only then in secrecy. Finally, when he eventually ‘discovers’ the knowledge he wants he interprets this as something that is available to him only, stating: ‘I was surprised that among so many men of genius, who had directed their inquiries towards the same science, that I alone should be reserved to discover so astonishing a secret’ (p. 34).

Similarly, Walton and Victor repeatedly lament the absence of a teacher in their lives. Walton bemoans that he has no friend who would ‘have sense enough not to despise me as romantic, and affection enough for me to endeavour to regulate my mind’ (Shelley, 1831/1994, p. 9). Describing himself as self-educated, he notes that his education was ‘neglected’. Victor (after having his interests dismissed by his father) describes dreams that are ‘undisturbed by reality’ (p. 23) with no adult
guidance as to the worthiness of his pursuits. The absence of guidance in the lives of Victor and Walton further demonstrates the limits of conceptualizing knowledge as something that can be obtained on one’s own. It is not surprising then that at the end of the novel, Victor attributes his failures to his own inexperience rather than a lack of guidance and dialogue with others. This is in keeping with his understanding that knowledge can be sought privately and individually removed from a wider, more complex context. Victor’s downfall (and indeed Walton’s stranding in the Arctic and the resulting loss of lives) can be read as the consequence of pursuing knowledge on one’s own, devoid of critical dialogue and engagement with others.

**Knowledge as Dialogical and Uncertain**

In contrast to Victor, what the Creature desires to know changes throughout the novel. Learning everything about the world for the first time, at first he wishes to know who made him, then wishes to know language, then wishes to use this to make friends and be connected to others. Unlike Victor, he does not pursue knowledge that will allow him to stand out from the rest of humanity; he pursues knowledge that will allow him to become connected to others. The more the Creature learns, the more connected he feels to others, quickly developing empathy towards the De Laceys. The Creature’s ability to develop empathy is in part due to having a view of knowledge that involves a certain amount of risk. The Creature’s understanding of knowledge as incomplete demands a certain degree of openness to new possibilities. It allows him to connect with what in many ways could be seen as irrelevant to him (the suffering of others). Yet the De Laceys’ problems become the prime motivators in his actions, to the point where he gives up food in favour of giving it to them. This transition, where the apparently irrelevant becomes relevant, might have been difficult if he had had a more finite view of the knowledge he was seeking to obtain.

Moreover, he accepts that risk and uncertainty are part of the process. The more the Creature learns about the De Lacey family, the more he feels connected to them. He prepares himself to meet ‘his protectors’, as he allows himself in ‘painful self-deceit’ to call them. He sees his future happiness as resting on the success of this meeting. His ability to accept that the outcome may not be what he desires demonstrates his awareness of risk.

**Knowledge as Personal Experience of the Everyday**

The Creature’s development of empathy, pleasure and identification with others is also made possible owing to the form of knowledge that he pursues. He learns through stories and everyday interactions such as listening to conversation. As the Creature realizes that language can connect him to the rest of the world he positions and privileges language as a science worthy of study and as the key to connectivity with others and with the world: ‘this to me was a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it’ (Shelley, 1831/1994, p. 88). In the same way that Victor commits himself to his study, the Creature commits himself with the same rigour, giving his ‘perpetual attention’ to studying the cottagers. Eventually he comes
to understand ‘the strange system of human society’ (p. 95). What is more, the very knowledge that allows him access and connection to the world allows him access and insight into himself, this new strange knowledge inspiring ‘strange feelings’ in him (p. 96). These ‘strange feelings’ ultimately lead the Creature to ask some critical, reflexive and philosophical questions such as ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where did I come from?’ Victor never arrives at these questions, and the Creature does not arrive at them through the kind of abstract, decontextualized knowledge that Victor engages with. The Creature arrives at these questions hearing stories, songs and conversations in the context of lived experiences.

In the next section, I consider the effects of different approaches to and concepts of knowledge for the possibility of humanization and the development of mutuality.

Discussion: Strangers and Orphans, Knowledge and Mutuality in Frankenstein

In Frankenstein, being alone and disconnected is a prevailing theme. The experience of being a stranger or an orphan is a dominant one for most of the characters, and the narrative is built around people who have been estranged from family and/or homelands. Caroline, Elizabeth, Justine, the De Lacey family, Safie, Walton, and of course the Creature, experience, at some point, a disconnection from others. Tellingly, it is as a stranger that we first meet Victor. This is significant because one of the most prominent features of Victor’s life is the presence of a family and community who unconditionally love and support him. As Yousef (2004) astutely observes, despite having lost family members, arguably as a result of his own actions, Victor actually remains surrounded by people who continue to look after him until the end of his life. Nevertheless, when we first meet him, he is a stranger and remains a stranger until Walton records his story. This recording of Victor’s history does not commence with a conventional introduction where Victor begins by introducing himself. Instead, it begins with a genealogy and it is only after we learn of his parents’ histories that we find out that his name is Victor. Corresponding with Yousef’s argument that ‘bearing a history’ is a marker of ‘being human’ (Yousef, 2004), it is not until Victor historically situates himself in relation to others that Walton (and readers) find out his name. This emphasis on social connectedness as a fundamental aspect of our being is later reinforced when the Creature, upon developing awareness of his existence, discovers: ‘half-frightened instinctively to find myself alone’ (Shelley, 1831/1994, p. 80, emphasis added). So why might strangers and orphans be important themes in the text and what might this tell us about the relationship between conceptions of knowledge and the potential for humanization and mutuality in education?

In Freire’s work, the link between knowledge and humanization is clear and robust. Any knowledge that emerges from a ‘banking model’ of education is oppressive and negates humanization. As discussed earlier, this form of knowledge is viewed as static and complete, and involves a level of passivity on behalf of the learner. Connected to the negation of humanization there is the associated barrier to community and mutuality. Consequently, this form of knowledge plays a role in inhibiting any kind of
social change. This is a problem in Freire’s view because it is participation and dialogue that allow the development of solidarity and identification with others.

In the novel, how Victor and the Creature conceive knowledge and what they pursue as knowledge have a direct impact on their ability to connect and identify with the needs of others. Victor, for example, repeatedly notes the distance that grows between him and his fellow beings. This change is almost immediate from the moment that science becomes his ‘sole occupation’, shunning his ‘fellow creatures as if guilty of a crime’ (Shelley, 1831/1994, p. 28). After Justine’s death, he begins to ‘shun the face of man; all sound of joy or complacency was torture to me; solitude was my only consolation—deep dark death-like solitude’ (p. 69). As the enormity of the consequences of his actions continues to unfold, he variously describes ‘insurmountable’ and ‘insuperable’ barriers between himself and others, declaring after the death of Clerval that he ‘had no right to share intercourse’ with others. If we follow Freire’s line of argument about the importance of knowledge that is socially produced and dialogical, then Victor’s failure to connect with others can, at least in part, be attributed to the nature of the knowledge that he pursues and the way in which he decides to seek it. Ultimately, Victor’s pursuit of knowledge does not contribute to humanization or his connection with others.

Almost conversely, the Creature’s quest for knowledge draws him closer to others and it is through his (notwithstanding one-sided) ‘relationship’ with the De Lacey family that his education begins. In the process of learning the Creature realizes that he has no link to the world because he has no links to others, and what he desires most in the end is to have companionship. His motivation for learning as much about the De Laceys as he can is so that he can establish a relationship with them, ‘The more I saw of them the greater became my desire to claim their protection and kindness’ (Shelley, 1831/1994, p. 99). Unlike Victor, the Creature’s pursuit of knowledge through observed conversations, stories, songs and everyday experiences enables him to develop empathy and social connectedness with others.

This discussion about the relationship between knowledge and mutuality offers much to current educational discourses. Knowledge is becoming increasingly tied to notions of standards and measurable outcomes. Often limited to what ‘skills’ are needed by society and the economy, across all sectors (primary, secondary and tertiary), there has been a move towards more market-oriented subjects at the expense of the arts and humanities (Nussbaum, 2010). In a curriculum subject such as English, for example, there is a move away from the critical and aesthetic dimensions of the subject to a more functional, skills-based subject (Locke, 2008; Rozas Gómez, 2011). Although possibly not the intention, this has resulted in much less emphasis being placed on developing creative and imaginative capabilities in students. This shift also constitutes knowledge in particular ways. Jean Francois Lyotard’s discussion of knowledge in The postmodern condition (1984) is useful in unpacking these contemporary understandings of knowledge. Lyotard suggests that the kind of knowledge that will be valued will be that which allows learners to perform small, localized roles. As marketable skills and knowledge become the drivers of education, the ‘social bond’ in society becomes fragmented, affecting our relationships with others. Drawing upon the notion of performativity, Ball (2003) elaborates Lyotard’s work by proposing that
knowledge which is performative in nature changes not only what is learnt but who learners become. These insights help to demonstrate the relationship between the kind of knowledge currently pursued in educational settings and how it might affect the development of social connectedness and mutuality. A view of knowledge that privileges observable and measurable outcomes inhibits the kind of knowledge that is more dialogical, incomplete and uncertain in nature. It resonates more strongly with the kind of ‘banking’ or traditional view of knowledge and learning that Freire argued is oppressive and dehumanizing.

The social connectedness that Freire contends is a fundamental part of education may be achieved through a curriculum that develops both critical and aesthetic sensibilities in students. Many educational writers have argued for the importance of imagination and creativity in developing empathy. Writers such as Fritzman (2000), Dhillon (2000) and Novitz (1987) all suggest that there is a connection between the imagination (and its purposeful development through formal education) and social progression and justice. Novitz (1987, p. 23) suggests that the ‘fanciful imagination’ leads to empirical knowledge, while Dhillon argues that developing the ‘literary imagination’ can lead to emancipation through students’ ability to imagine and feel responsibility for other people’s lives. This describes a ‘curriculum’ similar to the one the Creature pursues: one that carries a commitment to knowledge as unknown, socially produced and steeped in everyday experiences. In Romanticism and education, Halpin (2007) argues that emancipation comes from openness to something new. It is open to multiple possibilities including that which may initially be perceived as irrelevant. Further, the knowledge pursued should be ‘human knowledge’ that pays attention to emotion and experience (Egan, 1997). Any kind of knowledge or learning that is decontextualized, as literacy and numeracy initiatives are often outlined in educational policy, limits rather than maximizes the possibility of humanization and connectivity.

Conclusion

Knowledge, how we conceive of it and produce it, has the capacity to connect us to ‘all the relationships that bind one human being to another in mutual bonds’ (Shelley, 1831/1994, p. 97) or to make us strangers to each other. For Freire, that which makes us strange to each other inevitably makes us strangers to ourselves as our ontological vocation of humanization becomes thwarted. In this sense, it can be argued that Frankenstein affirms the social imperative in Freire’s account of our ontology and epistemology.

To view language/communication and stories as ‘strange’ and as a science places them in a realm that is slightly removed from us; such an approach demands that everyday knowledge be considered new and exciting and worth pursuing. To disregard the value of stories for connectivity leaves us exposed to the possibility of severed communities and an absence of mutuality. To know without connection to others is an alienating process in itself.

The kind of knowledge pursued in educational contexts requires, first, openness to knowledge as uncertain. Second, it requires a commitment to knowledge as dialogical and socially produced. Third, it involves making everyday knowledge strange and
worthy of pursuit, as any knowledge that draws us away from the value of emotion and experience inevitably draws us away from each other.

At the conclusion of his experiment Victor abandons his creation immediately. While hiding in his room he notes that the Creature ‘may have spoken’ but that he ‘did not hear’, a subtle but clear statement about the disastrous consequences of pursuing knowledge in a way that does not contribute to mutual responsibility and community with each other.

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References


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