

Trauma, Performance, and Posthuman Subjectivity in Kiersten White's *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein*

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ABSTRACT

Kiersten White's *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* reimagines Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* by relocating narrative authority from Victor Frankenstein to Elizabeth Lavenza, a character largely confined to the margins of the original text. This shift in perspective enables the novel to foreground questions of trauma, gendered power, and identity formation that remain less visible in Shelley's narrative. This article examines how White's adaptation reconstructs subjectivity through the interconnected frameworks of trauma studies and posthumanism. Drawing on Christa Schönfelder's concept of complex trauma, Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Erving Goffman's analysis of social performance, and posthuman perspectives developed by N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti, the article argues that Elizabeth's identity emerges through continuous negotiation with systems of dependency, coercion, and institutional control. Rather than depicting trauma as an isolated event, the novel presents it as a condition produced through unequal social relationships and structures of power. Elizabeth's performed femininity functions as a survival strategy that simultaneously enables agency and produces psychological fragmentation. By placing Elizabeth's experiences alongside those of the Creature, White further destabilizes distinctions between human and non-human subjectivity. Both figures reveal that identity is shaped not by essential qualities or biological origin but through processes of recognition, exclusion, and adaptation. Ultimately, the article argues that *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* redefines monstrosity as a product of coercive social structures and positions trauma as a force that exposes the instability of the autonomous human subject.

Keywords: Trauma, Posthumanism, Performativity, Identity, Adaptation studies, Kiersten White, *Frankenstein*

INTRODUCTION

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has generated a wide range of contemporary adaptations that revisit the novel through marginalized perspectives and challenge the authority of Victor Frankenstein's narrative. These reinterpretations often move beyond questions of scientific transgression to examine broader concerns surrounding gender, identity, and power. Among them, Kiersten White's *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* offers a significant feminist reimagining of Shelley's text by relocating the centre of consciousness from Victor Frankenstein to Elizabeth Lavenza. In Shelley's novel, Elizabeth exists largely through Victor's

narration and functions primarily as an idealized domestic figure whose emotional labour supports the men around her. White's adaptation disrupts this narrative structure by granting Elizabeth her own voice and reinterpreting familiar events through her experiences of dependency, coercion, and survival.

This shift in focalization transforms the ideological concerns of *Frankenstein*. Rather than centring scientific ambition alone, White's novel examines how systems of gendered power shape identity and regulate belonging. Elizabeth's experiences reveal that trauma does not emerge solely from extraordinary acts of violence but also from the everyday conditions of insecurity, emotional dependence, and social control that structure

her life. By foregrounding these experiences, the novel exposes the ways in which identity is produced through negotiation with external expectations rather than through autonomous self-determination.

Feminist scholarship on *Frankenstein* has long identified the limitations imposed upon female characters within Shelley's novel. Colleen Hobbs argues that *Frankenstein* assigns emotional labour to women, positioning female characters as caretakers responsible for maintaining masculine emotional stability (157–58). Similarly, Jasmin Sophie Vandeplas observes that Elizabeth exists almost entirely through Victor's narration and exemplifies the exclusion of women from intellectual and narrative authority (2–3). Such scholarship has demonstrated how female subjectivity remains constrained within the patriarchal structures of Shelley's text.

Recent criticism on White's adaptation has expanded these discussions by examining its feminist intervention within the *Frankenstein* tradition. Emily Wotherspoon argues that White employs alternative focalization to reconstruct Elizabeth as a complex figure whose relationships are shaped less by romance than by survival and coercive dependence (10–11). White's adaptation has therefore been recognized for recovering Elizabeth's perspective and exposing Victor as both manipulator and abuser. However, existing scholarship has primarily focused on questions of adaptation, narrative authority, and feminist reclamation. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the relationship between trauma and posthuman subjectivity within the novel.

Examining this intersection is particularly important because *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* repeatedly challenges the humanist conception of identity as coherent, autonomous, and self-determined. Christa Schönfelder's concept of complex trauma provides a useful framework for understanding Elizabeth's experiences, as it emphasizes how trauma may emerge within caregiving systems expected to provide security but which instead produce instability and emotional insecurity (73). Elizabeth's position within the Frankenstein household reflects this condition because her acceptance remains dependent upon her ability to satisfy the expectations of others.

The novel's representation of identity also resonates with theories of performativity and social performance. Judith Butler argues that gender functions as a "strategy

of survival" within culture and is constituted through repeated social acts rather than fixed essence (522). Similarly, Erving Goffman argues that social acceptance depends upon the successful presentation of socially acceptable performances (23–24). Elizabeth's performed femininity may, therefore, be understood not as an expression of an authentic self but as an adaptive response to conditions of precarity and dependence.

These concerns further intersect with posthuman theories that challenge the stability of the human subject. N. Katherine Hayles argues that posthumanism challenges the humanist conception of identity as a coherent and autonomous subject independent of external systems (2–3). Likewise, Rosi Braidotti conceptualizes subjectivity as relational, multiple, and continuously shaped through interactions with others (201). Although Elizabeth is not posthuman in a literal sense, her experiences reveal how identity is constructed through relationships, power structures, and social expectations rather than emerging from an essential inner core.

This article argues that *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* presents trauma as a condition produced through systems of dependency, coercion, and institutional control. Elizabeth's response to these conditions takes the form of strategic performances of femininity that destabilize humanist conceptions of identity as coherent, autonomous, and self-determined. Through the parallel experiences of Elizabeth and the Creature, White ultimately reveals subjectivity to be relational, contingent, and continuously negotiated. By bringing trauma studies into conversation with posthuman theory, this article demonstrates how White's adaptation redefines monstrosity not as an inherent condition but as a consequence of exclusion, vulnerability, and unequal structures of power.

Trauma and Posthuman Subjectivity

Elizabeth's earliest experiences establish belonging as contingent rather than unconditional. Before entering the Frankenstein household, she learns that acceptance must be earned through usefulness and emotional compliance. Her caregiver's instruction, "Make them love you. If they do not take you, I will drown you," transforms affection into a prerequisite for survival rather than an expression of care (White 7). The threat creates a direct relationship between belonging and vulnerability, teaching Elizabeth that her security depends upon her ability to satisfy the expectations of others.

Christa Schönfelder's concept of complex trauma is useful for understanding this dynamic. Schönfelder argues that trauma frequently emerges within caregiving systems expected to provide protection but which instead generate instability and insecurity (73). Unlike trauma resulting from singular catastrophic events, complex trauma develops through prolonged exposure to environments in which safety remains uncertain. Elizabeth's experiences reflect this condition because the relationships that promise protection repeatedly reinforce her dependence.

Although the Frankenstein household offers material security, it does not eliminate this precarity. Elizabeth quickly recognizes that her place within the family is conditional and closely tied to Victor's needs. She acknowledges that she must become "whatever [Victor] needed" in order to maintain her position within the household (White 8). Her acceptance therefore, depends less upon who she is than upon the functions she performs for others.

This dependence shapes Elizabeth's understanding of relationships throughout the novel. Rather than experiencing attachment as a source of emotional security, she learns to associate intimacy with obligation and self-surveillance. Victor occupies a particularly significant position within this structure because he functions simultaneously as companion, protector, and arbiter of Elizabeth's value. His approval determines the extent of her inclusion within the family, making resistance difficult even when his demands conflict with her own judgment.

The tree-climbing episode illustrates how these unequal dynamics operate. Although Elizabeth hesitates when Victor insists that she retrieve the bird's nest, she ultimately complies despite her reservations (White 10). The significance of the scene lies not in the act itself but in the relational structure it reveals. Elizabeth suppresses her own instincts in order to preserve Victor's approval, demonstrating how dependence encourages self-regulation and compliance.

Victor's influence becomes increasingly coercive as the narrative progresses. His authority extends beyond directing Elizabeth's behaviour to shaping her understanding of reality itself. Paige Sweet argues that gaslighting functions through unequal power relations that systematically undermine an individual's confidence in their own perceptions (857). Similarly, Jewels Adair defines gaslighting as a form of manipulation that distorts

memory and reality in order to establish control (10). Elizabeth's interactions with Victor reflect these dynamics because he repeatedly positions himself as the sole authority capable of determining what is true, reasonable, and credible.

The culmination of this process occurs when Victor arranges Elizabeth's confinement in an asylum. Rather than responding to her concerns about his experiments, he reframes her experiences as evidence of psychological instability. By insisting that "Elizabeth's mind broke" and claiming that she "imagined the whole thing," Victor transforms her knowledge into proof of her supposed irrationality (White 232). Her resistance is thus reinterpreted as pathology.

Victor's ability to impose this narrative depends not only upon his personal authority but also upon the support of institutional structures. He anticipates that "sympathetic doctors" will validate his version of events and ensure Elizabeth's confinement (White 232). The asylum consequently functions as an extension of his power, reinforcing his account while denying Elizabeth the ability to define her own experience.

Vijay Aryal argues that disciplinary systems regulate behaviour through surveillance and normalization, encouraging individuals to internalize dominant expectations (93). Similarly, As-Sadiqi, Yousaf, and Rizwan suggest that institutional power determines what counts as rationality and sanity by enforcing particular standards of behaviour (1140). Elizabeth's confinement illustrates these processes clearly. Once her perspective is classified as irrational, institutional authority renders her resistance unintelligible.

The novel's representation of the asylum also reflects the historical medicalization of female dissent. Elizabeth's refusal to accept Victor's version of reality becomes evidence of madness rather than a rational response to manipulation and deception. Her experiences reveal how institutions claiming to provide care may instead reinforce existing power structures by regulating whose perceptions are considered credible.

Through Elizabeth's experiences, *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* presents trauma as inseparable from systems that govern belonging, credibility, and normality. Violence in the novel operates not only through overt acts of coercion but also through relationships and institutions that transform dependency into a mechanism of control. Trauma emerges from the persistent uncertainty produced by these structures,

demonstrating how care itself can become a means of regulation when acceptance remains conditional.

Performing Survival: Gender and Adaptive Identity

If trauma in *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* emerges through conditions of dependency and coercion, Elizabeth's response to these conditions takes the form of strategic self-fashioning. Throughout the novel, survival depends not upon direct resistance but upon the ability to anticipate expectations, manage perceptions, and perform socially acceptable forms of femininity. White's adaptation, therefore, presents identity not as a stable inner essence but as an ongoing negotiation between individual desire and social necessity.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity provides a useful framework for understanding Elizabeth's behaviour. Butler argues that gender is constituted through repeated social acts rather than originating from a fixed or essential identity (528–30). Because individuals who fail to conform to normative expectations are often punished, gender functions as a "strategy of survival" within culture (522). Elizabeth's experiences reflect this process. Her femininity is not presented as natural or spontaneous but as a carefully cultivated performance developed in response to conditions of precarity.

White repeatedly emphasizes Elizabeth's awareness that femininity operates as a learned practice. Reflecting on her appearance, Elizabeth describes beauty as "a skill" and "a language of its own" that can be adapted according to circumstance (White 27). Beauty, in this context, becomes a form of social labour rather than an innate attribute. Elizabeth learns to regulate her behaviour, appearance, and emotional expression because these performances determine how others respond to her.

Erving Goffman's discussion of social performance further illuminates this process. Goffman argues that individuals manage impressions in order to secure social acceptance and maintain desired relationships (23–24). Identity, from this perspective, emerges through interaction rather than existing independently of it. Elizabeth demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of these dynamics, continually modifying her behaviour according to the expectations of different audiences.

Her encounter with Frau Gottschalk illustrates the strategic nature of this self-presentation. By adopting a posture of deference and exaggerated gratitude, Elizabeth

successfully gains access to information that would otherwise remain unavailable to her. Her declaration that Frau Gottschalk is "an angel sent before us for our protection" reveals an awareness of the expectations associated with ideal femininity and her ability to manipulate them to achieve specific goals (White 13). Compliance, in this instance, becomes a form of negotiation rather than submission.

A similar dynamic shapes Elizabeth's relationship with Justine. When she intervenes to remove Justine from an abusive environment, she does not reject conventional femininity outright. Instead, she mobilizes the moral authority associated with her social position to challenge existing power structures. Her insistence that Justine accompany her demonstrates how the performance of gentleness and respectability can be used strategically to create opportunities for resistance (White 19). White's adaptation, therefore, complicates conventional distinctions between compliance and agency by suggesting that survival often requires their simultaneous enactment.

This strategic performance also extends to Elizabeth's relationships with men. Emily Wotherspoon argues that White presents the performance of heterosexuality as a means of survival rather than an expression of romantic attachment (11). Elizabeth's interactions with Victor and Henry Clerval are shaped less by emotional fulfilment than by practical concerns regarding security and independence.

Elizabeth's reflections reveal her awareness of these dynamics. She recognizes that she has been "saved . . . from poverty and, in the same stroke, doomed . . . to utter dependence" (White 102). Relationships consequently become sites of negotiation rather than sources of unconditional intimacy. Her interest in Henry emerges not simply from affection but from the possibility that he might offer an alternative to Victor's control (White 133). Intimacy, in this context, functions as a strategy for navigating unequal structures of power.

However, White's novel does not portray performance as an uncomplicated source of empowerment. The continuous adaptation of behaviour to external expectations gradually erodes Elizabeth's confidence in the existence of an authentic self. Having spent her life performing identities designed to secure acceptance and protection, she struggles to distinguish between genuine desire and learned behaviour. This uncertainty culminates in her question, "Who was I when

I was not performing for someone else?" (White 239).

The significance of this moment lies not simply in Elizabeth's self-doubt but in what it reveals about the psychological consequences of prolonged self-regulation. Performance enables survival, yet it also obscures the boundaries between adaptation and identity. The self presented to others becomes increasingly difficult to separate from the self experienced internally.

Through Elizabeth's experiences, *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* challenges the assumption that identity originates from a stable inner essence. Instead, the novel presents subjectivity as a process of continual negotiation shaped by social expectations, gender norms, and unequal power relations. Elizabeth's performed femininity allows her to navigate environments structured by coercion and dependence, but it also exposes the extent to which identity itself may be constructed through adaptation to external demands.

Trauma and Posthuman Subjectivity

Elizabeth's experiences of dependency, self-fashioning, and psychological fragmentation ultimately raise a broader question about the nature of subjectivity itself. If identity is continuously shaped by external expectations and sustained through performance, the notion of a coherent and autonomous self becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* challenges this humanist understanding of identity by presenting subjectivity as contingent, relational, and produced through interactions with social structures rather than originating from an essential inner core.

N. Katherine Hayles argues that posthumanism contests the liberal humanist conception of the self as a coherent, autonomous subject independent of external systems (2–3). Instead, posthuman thought emphasizes the extent to which subjectivity emerges through relationships, networks, and material conditions. Similarly, Rosi Braidotti conceptualizes subjectivity as non-unitary and relational, arguing that identity is continuously formed through interactions with others rather than grounded in stable essence (201). Although White's novel does not depict Elizabeth as posthuman in a literal sense, her experiences reveal the limitations of humanist assumptions regarding autonomy, self-determination, and authenticity.

White reinforces this challenge to humanist identity through the parallel experiences of Elizabeth and the Creature. Although one is biologically human and the

other artificially created, both figures are defined by their dependence upon Victor Frankenstein and their struggle for recognition. Each occupies a precarious position within social structures that determine whose experiences are considered legitimate and whose existence is deemed acceptable.

The Creature's body is materially assembled through scientific experimentation, while Elizabeth's identity is socially constructed through expectations of femininity, obedience, and emotional labour. Despite these differences, both are denied autonomy because their value is determined by the roles they are expected to fulfil. Victor imagines himself as the creator of both figures, seeking to regulate their behaviour and define the terms of their existence.

Their shared experiences reveal that subjectivity is shaped less by biological origin than by processes of recognition and exclusion. The Creature's suffering emerges not simply because he is artificially created but because he is denied social acceptance. Similarly, Elizabeth's trauma stems not from her adoption into the Frankenstein family alone but from the conditions attached to her belonging. In both cases, identity depends upon external validation.

Braidotti's concept of non-unitary subjectivity provides a useful framework for understanding this parallel. For Braidotti, subjectivity is neither singular nor self-contained but emerges through relationships and networks of power (201). Elizabeth and the Creature exemplify this relational model because their identities are continually negotiated through interactions with others. Their experiences demonstrate that the self cannot be separated from the social conditions that enable or constrain recognition.

White's adaptation further destabilizes distinctions between human and non-human subjectivity by exposing the constructed nature of identity itself. The Creature's artificial body makes visible processes of construction that remain less apparent in conventional understandings of human identity. Elizabeth's experiences reveal that social expectations similarly construct human subjectivity through repeated acts of regulation and normalization. The contrast between biological and artificial life, therefore, becomes less significant than the shared experience of being shaped by external forces.

This emphasis on recognition is particularly evident in the novel's reworking of monstrosity. Rather than presenting monstrosity as an inherent characteristic,

White associates it with exclusion and the denial of personhood. Both Elizabeth and the Creature become monstrous insofar as they fail to conform to the expectations imposed upon them. Their experiences suggest that humanity is not guaranteed by biological status but is instead granted or withheld through social processes.

The novel's conclusion reinforces this challenge to stable categories of identity. Elizabeth's recognition that she has become "something new" signals not the achievement of a fixed self but an acceptance of subjectivity as fluid and continuously evolving (White 267). Her transformation does not resolve the tensions between performance and authenticity. Instead, it acknowledges that identity remains an ongoing process of negotiation shaped by relationships, vulnerability, and adaptation.

Through the parallel experiences of Elizabeth and the Creature, *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* reimagines subjectivity beyond the limits of humanist thought. White's adaptation suggests that identity is neither innate nor autonomous but emerges through systems of recognition, power, and social interaction. Trauma does not simply disrupt an already coherent self. Rather, it exposes the extent to which selfhood has always been relational, contingent, and continuously constructed.

Conclusion

Kiersten White's *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* reimagines Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* by shifting attention from scientific ambition to the lived experiences of those marginalized within the original narrative. Through Elizabeth's perspective, the novel reveals that monstrosity emerges not from inherent abnormality but from systems of dependency, exclusion, and unequal power relations that shape individual subjectivity.

This article has argued that Elizabeth's experiences are structured by forms of complex trauma produced through conditional belonging, emotional manipulation, and institutional control. Her place within the Frankenstein household depends upon her ability to fulfil the expectations imposed upon her, transforming care into a mechanism of regulation and belonging into a source of precarity. Trauma in the novel therefore, operates not as an isolated event but as an ongoing condition embedded within relationships and social

structures.

Elizabeth's response to these conditions takes the form of strategic self-fashioning. By performing culturally sanctioned forms of femininity, she negotiates environments shaped by coercion and dependence. However, these performances do not simply enable survival. They also destabilize the distinction between authentic and constructed identity by revealing the extent to which selfhood is shaped through adaptation to external expectations.

Through the parallel experiences of Elizabeth and the Creature, White further challenges the humanist conception of the autonomous subject. Although one is biologically human and the other artificially created, both figures depend upon recognition from others and struggle to establish identities independent of Victor's authority. Their experiences suggest that subjectivity is neither innate nor self-determined but emerges through networks of power, social interaction, and processes of inclusion and exclusion.

By bringing trauma studies into conversation with posthuman theory, this article demonstrates that *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* expands the critical possibilities of contemporary *Frankenstein* adaptations. White's novel reveals that trauma does not merely disrupt an already coherent self. Instead, it exposes the extent to which identity has always been relational, contingent, and continuously negotiated.

Ultimately, *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* suggests that the boundaries between human and non-human subjectivity are less significant than the structures that determine who is recognized, who belongs, and whose experiences are considered legitimate. In doing so, the novel redefines monstrosity as a consequence of exclusion and positions trauma as a force that reveals the instability of the autonomous human subject.

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