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Lit 683-001

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May 2, 2022

Tyler the Creator's *Igor* and Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*: A Dialogue

Mary Shelly's novel *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus* explores ideas of marginalization through the creature and how he navigates the world. The novel has spawned an entire genre of monster stories and a century of the use of Frankenstein's creature to explore feelings of marginalization. I want to explore how Monsterhood is used to explore ideas of marginalization and societal rejection. One recent work that uses the idea of monster hood to explore ideas of marginalization and societal rejection is Tyler the Creator's 2019 album *Igor*. I will explore how this album and its associated music videos interact with the original Frankenstein and the Gothic and its themes through a queer of color context. The affordances of the *Frankenstein* novel makes it the perfect

The queerness of the Frankenstein figure has been very well discussed. In "Why Frankenstein's Monster Haunts Queer Art", Charlie Fox states that the reason for queer associations with Frankenstein is that

there's something about this story of unhallowed arts that makes it darkly resonant for queer artists beyond any other group. When you're gay and grow up feeling like a hideous misfit, fully conscious that some believe your desires to be wicked and want to kill you for them, identifying with the Monster is hardly a stretch: A misunderstood beast finds solace in the solitude of the woods, but seems to endlessly face the wrath of the torch-bearing, small-minded inhabitants in the world beyond. (Fox)

This interpretation implies that loneliness is what fuels the queer readings of the text. Fox sees the creature as more than just a singular character but as a larger archetype, like the Vampire. Fox says that

If vampires occupy a magical role in the erotic life of adolescents as cultivated loners (consider Robert Pattinson in the “Twilight” saga, 2008-12, or everybody in “Only Lovers Left Alive,” 2013), Frankenstein’s Monster is their nightmarish queer counterpart. He’s a misfit child spurned by his father who grows up to be a sensitive oddity, too strange to be accepted by society or reproduce naturally and forced to seek refuge in seclusion. (Fox)

This broader analysis would place *Igor* in a larger conversation with the cultural legacy of Shelly’s novel, with the generic Frankenstein’s monster figure. Tyler the Creator’s Igor figure would be another use of the creature as a symbol of queerness as a source of societal anxieties and fears.

Frankenstien also works to support Tyler the Creator’s exploration of his identity as a Black Man in a relationship with a white man. Elizabeth Young’s book *Black Frankenstein* explores how Frankenstein can serve as an allegory for Black experiences. According to Young,

Writing on 1860 on the eve of the civil war, Frederick Dougless declared, “Slavery is everywhere the pet monster of the American people... In the “now” of 1968, Gregory saw the African American urban uprisings of the area in terms of the monster’s revenge against his creator. In the sphere of Domestic US race relations, as in that of US foreign policy, Frankenstein was the story of blowback. (Young 4)

In other words, the story Victor’s creation and mistreatment of the creature ended with the creature getting revenge also serves as a metaphor for how Black people escape from and get

revenge for their oppression and exploitation. It is interesting that Frederick Douglass was one of the first to use the Frankenstein's creature archetype to describe Black issue Douglass, as he was able to escape from Slavery and detailed his life story and his escape in his *A Narrative of the Life* ended up helping spread the message of abolition, in a way making him a Frankenstein figure. This idea of the Black Frankenstein seems to me to be an evolution of the idea of the Black Prometheus proposed by Jared Hickman. According to Hickman,

The bona fide rebellion latent in the Prometheus myth is finally realized not in a transcendent Manicheanism—Olympians versus titans or Olympians versus humans, for that matter—but in the immanent Manicheanism of racial slavery—which pits a white or “Caucasian” Prometheus embodied in the master (actual or potential) against a black or “African” Prometheus embodied in the slave rebel (actual or potential) (Hickman Intro)

Hickman goes on to connect the idea of two Prometheuses to the story of Frankenstein, saying that

Frankenstein features two racialized Prometheuses whose quests for mastery cancel each other out because the object of those quests of mastery is precisely the person of the other. This equivalence, I am arguing—whether attributed to Mary herself or instead to her character-narrators, Victor and Walton—obscures the positional difference and, indeed, structural inequality of Victor and the creature and thereby undermines any moral rationale for just rebellion against the cosmic status quo. (Hickman ch 5)

This explains why the figure of Frankenstein's creature affords reclamation by Black artists, and also explains why Tyler the Creator was able to use the figure to such affect in *Igor*:

Igor exists as a piece situated in relation to both the original Mary Shelley Novel and the popular culture versions of the character. The cover of *Igor*, where Tyler the Creator's head is in

black and white, seems to evoke the Boris Karloff version of the creature. According to Susan Striker,

Frankenstein's monster articulates its unnatural situation within the natural world with far more sophistication in Shelley's novel than might be expected by those familiar only with the version played by Boris Karloff in James Whale's classic films from the 1930s. Film critic Vito Russo suggests that Whale's interpretation of the monster was influenced by the fact that the director was a closeted gay man at the time he made his Frankenstein films. The pathos he imparted to his monster derived from the experience of his own hidden sexual identity. (8) Monstrous and unnatural in the eyes of the world, but seeking only the love of his own kind and the acceptance of human society, Whale's creature externalizes and renders visible the nightmarish loneliness and alienation that the closet can breed. But this is not the monster who speaks to me so potently of my own situation as an openly transsexual being. I emulate instead Mary Shelley's literary monster, who is quick-witted, agile, strong, and eloquent. (Stryker 248)

The Igor character of *Igor* follows more with Stryker's description of the literary monster. Tyler the Creator's wordplay and lyricism is a far cry from the naive innocence of Karloff. For example the lines in the song "Running out of Time" "Wade in your water (Wade in your water)/ Your waves wash over me /I drift to the deep end /Don't save, don't save, don't save /It's a low tide (I'll be fine) /I found peace in drowning" Fits more with the quick-witted nature of Shelly's creature rather than the innocence of the Karloff version. Another verse, from the song "A Boy is a Gun" has the lines "Take your hoodie off, why you hide your face from me?/Make your fuckin' mind up, I am sick of waitin' patiently/ How come you're the best to me? I know you're the worst for me/Boy, you're sweet as sugar, diabetic to the first degree" Igor's words are very intentional

and are able to showcase an assertive sense of identity like Shelly's creature instead of the innocence of James Whale's creature. Igor, like Stryker, identifies more with the original text and Mary Shelly's words than any other source.



(*Igor* cover and Boris Karloff as Frankenstein from *Frankenstein* (1931))

The next song, “Earquake”, is a love ballad that signifies Igor’s infatuation with his love interest. It is notable that these are Igor’s first thoughts after awakening, a pure infatuation. Tyler uses natural imagery of an Earthquake to describe how Igor’s infatuation is making him feel.

After this feeling of mindless infatuation comes the song “I think”, the next stage in Igor’s development. Just as the creature quickly developed from voiceless action to being able to think deeply through the DeLaceys’ Tyler having encountered love has begun to go from simply feeling love to thinking about it. The phrase “I think” is repeated throughout the album, with the chorus saying “I think I’m falling in love, this time I think it's for real!” This evokes an idea of a dialectic occurring within Igor between his rational side and his emotional side. Throughout the

album Igor has bursts of emotion that are followed by moments of deep thought, realizations, and self reflection. As another example, after the strong rage of the song “What’s Good” Tyler realizes that his relationship is toxic and he rationally decides to leave his love interest in the two songs “Gone, Gone/Thank you” and “I Don’t Love You Anymore” before again reverting back to emotion in “Are We Still Friends?”

This idea of a dialectic between thinking and feeling in Igor being similar to the idea of the creature's development in *Frankenstein* evokes the idea of the rights of the child. According to Eileen Hunt Botting, “*Frankenstein* is a profound work of speculative fiction designed to engage philosophical questions concerning children’s rights to the means for their healthy development and wellbeing—fundamentally, rights to warmth, food, water, clothing, shelter, care, education, family, community, and, most crucially, love.”(Botting) The entire Igor album is about Tyler the Creator, through the Igor persona, arguing that he has the right to love. While Tyler is far from being a child, I feel like this question of the rights of the child is deeply connected to questions of queer identity. For one, queerness, especially when discovered later in life, can push adolescent explorations of love and self identity past childhood. Queer children are often denied the community and love that they need because of their sexuality and identity and find it later in life. In Tyler’s case, he is exploring queer love through a very youthful lens. “Earfquake” and its pure visceral emotion evokes the idea of young love, pure and inexperienced. However, the progression of the album shows Tyler getting more and more disillusioned until the relationship ends. There is a development going on, one that Igor and presumably Tyler is facing on their own without a support system.

The illicit nature of the relationship is isolating. I argue that the love triangle in Igor of Tyler the creator’s character Igor, his male love interest, and the woman that Igor’s love interest

is dating in the open while he hides his relationship with Igor is meant to be a parallel to the character dynamics between the Creature, Victor Frankenstein, and Elizabeth. Victor and the creature's relationship has been viewed through a queer lens before. In George E. Haggerty's "What is Queer about Frankenstein?" he argues that the story has "lurid devotion between males, sexual aggression, and finally a completely obsessive relation between a scientist and the violent other he has created." (Haggerty 116) Mair Rigby argues that the creature is a representation of Frankenstein's homosocial bonding with the other male characters in the novel, saying that "the Monster haunts the representation of all male relationships in the novel." (113) There is definitely something homoerotic about the relationship between Victor Frankenstein and the creature.

In the album, Igor's love interest has given Igor a queer awakening of sorts. Igor starts with a humming sound, a blaring note that evokes the Om sound that according to Hindu mythology was the sound of the creation of the Universe. The electronic version of the Om sound evokes Frankenstein's existence as the modern Prometheus, mixing a sound of creation with technology. The first song, Igor's Theme, involves the repetition of several words and phrases over again, like "running", "got my eyes open," "Riding round town they gon' feel this one" "What" and more. These repeated phrases feel like the start of a heartbeat, evoking that just as the creature in Frankenstein was brought to life, Tyler the Creator's character is being brought to life. The next song, the love ballad "Earquake," shows that this awakening was one of queer infatuation. The male love interest is the Promethean figure, giving the fire of homosexual attraction to Igor, a clear stand-in for Victor Frankenstein. Just like the creature, Igor after being awakened is desperate for the love and affection of Victor, but also like the creature he does not receive the love he needs.

Thus enters the stand in for Elizabeth, the unnamed girlfriend of Igor's love interest. She is first mentioned in the song "Running out of Time", where Igor first expresses feelings other than euphoria about the relationship. Igor sing "Take your mask off/I need her out the picture/(Wade in your water)/Take your mask off (Yeah)/Stop lyin' for these *****/Stop lyin' to yourself/I know the real you/Don't save, don't save, don't save/Halloween ain't for a minute, lose the costume"(Okonma) These lines set up that Igor is frustrated that his love interest is unwilling to be openly gay and date him and is instead in a relationship with a woman. This sets up the next song in the album, the dark and intense song "New Magic Wand" The song begins with the lines "I saw a photo, you looked joyous/ My eyes are green, I eat my veggies/ I need to get her out the picture/ She's really *****/up my frame/ She's not developed like we are" (Okonma) Igor sees the girl as the hindrance to his relationship with the male love interest being out in the open. The reference to green eyes seems to refer to being green with envy, as well as a connection to popular depictions of the creature as having green skin. The whole song has Igor hoping that she vanished as if by the use of a magic wand. The song builds to a point where Igor says "Your other one evaporate, we celebrate/You under oath, now pick a side and if you don't/I'll pick you both/It's not a joke, murder she wrote."(Okanwa) The music then switches to a mechanistic crescendo with a repeated piano note and a repeated sound that sound like a machine starting up as something evoking a siren plays. Then the beat drops and Tyler quickly raps about his fears about being abandoned by his love interest and how he needs him to come out, saying 'I wanna share last names, I wanna be your number one/Not the other one, keep it on the low/I'm in my right mind, keep it on a high" (Okonma) This expression of violence is a direct link to the creature's murder of Elizabeth in the novel. Comparing the song "New Magic Wand" to the creature's threats to Victor there is a similarity in the positionality of the two. When the creature

threatens Victor Frankenstein and says he will ruin his marriage, he says. “I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you.”(Shelly ch 20) This assertion of power is exactly what Igor is doing in his bravado filled singing and rapping in “New Magic Wand.”

While Igor in the album *Igor* seems to be primarily inspired by the relationship of the creature to Victor Frankenstein, the use of the name Igor is more than just incidental. Igor never appeared in the original novel, but a lot of interpretations of the Igor character seem to be derived from the character of Clerval in the novel. In a description of Daniel Radcliffe's version of Igor, Marta Vega Trijueque says that “Igor blends the friendship and rationality of Henry Clerval in the novel and the assistance Igor offers in the earlier versions.” (29) While very different characters in many ways, Clerval seems to be the closest thing the original novel has to Igor. If this is the case, is Tyler the Creator’s Igor character linked to Clerval?

Clerval has also been heavily interpreted as Victor Frankenstein’s love interest. Siyu Yang in “Homophobia and the Queered Gothic in Frankenstein” said that the relationship between Clerval and Victor is way more intimate than the one with his supposed love interest Elizabeth.(Yang 1) George Haggerty also has this reading of Clerval, analyzing Victor Frankenstein’s reaction to Clerval's death especially when compared to the death of Elizabeth Lavenza.

Victor’s sensations here – the sense of loss coupled with responsibility – unmans him (he is ‘carried out of the room in strong convulsions’ (p. 148)) and it also reminds him what his act of creation has really meant. Not only his almost non-existent love-life with Elizabeth, but also the world of masculine privilege that he shared with Clerval is now

blasted... Victor laments this loss so bitterly because he knows that his refusal to create a second dæmon has broken the bond of friendship that has allowed him to flourish as he has. If, in other words, what Sedgwick called the homosocial is exploded in this novel, then it becomes even queerer than the Gothic works that surround it. (Haggerty 124-135)

If the relationship between Victor and Clerval is queer, is Tyler the Creator's Igor inspired by Clerval? I would argue that this is the case, while not to the level that Igor emulates the creature. I do think that the queerness of Clerval that these theorists discuss has been translated into the generic Igor archetype. Clerval and Victor seem to be equals, while the relationship between Igor and his love interest is unequal, like the assistant nature of the pop culture conception of Igor. However, Tyler's Igor strives to be like the Clerval to his love interest's Frankenstein. The line "I need to get her out the picture/She's really f***** up the frame/She's not developed like we are." (Okonma) in the song "New Magic Wand" shows how Igor wants to have a relationship like Victor and Clerval, but as the album goes on he realizes that he is just an Igor figure to his love interest.

One other important aspect of the album that refers back to the Frankenstein novel is the cyclical nature of it. Igor ends with the same blaring sound that it begins with, implying that the toxic cycle of Igor's relationship will reoccur over and over again. As the album progresses, Igor in the songs "Gone, Gone/Thank You" and "I Don't Love You Anymore" is able to realize that his relationship is a toxic and healthy one and gets over it. However, the last song, "Are We Still Friends" has Igor desperately trying to reconnect with his love interest, with the last sound being the same tone from the beginning. In addition to adding to the replayability of the album, This choice implies that Igor will just keep going back to this toxic relationship over and over again. This has two connections to the Frankenstein novel. Firstly, it is similar to the creature, despite

being mistreated, weeping over Frankenstein at the end of the novel. The creature, in deep sorrow, says

Farewell! I leave you, and in you the last of humankind whom these eyes will ever behold. Farewell, Frankenstein! If thou wert yet alive and yet cherished a desire of revenge against me, it would be better satiated in my life than in my destruction. But it was not so; thou didst seek my extinction, that I might not cause greater wretchedness; and if yet, in some mode unknown to me, thou hadst not ceased to think and feel, thou wouldst not desire against me a vengeance greater than that which I feel. Blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine, for the bitter sting of remorse will not cease to rankle in my wounds until death shall close them for ever.” (Shelly ch 24)

The Song “Are We Still Friends” fits so well with this moment, with Igor despite how badly he is treated by his love interest still cares about him deeply, enough to hurt himself by rekindling the relationship. The cyclical nature of the album also fits with the framing of the novel. Just as the novel starts and ends with Walton in the arctic, the album starts and ends with the tone that is evocative of creation.

The connections to Gothic literature in *Igor* go beyond just the lyrics. The music of the album evokes gothic soundscapes. Kristie A. Schlauraff, gives a description of what the gothic Soundcape is in her article “Victorian Gothic Soundscapes.” One of the things she mentions being a part of the gothic soundscape is sounds of machinery. (Schlauraff 5) A lot of the beats in *Igor* have sounds that evoke the sounds of machinery. Schlauraff also says that Gothic music is spectral and performs excess.(Schlauraff 5) This association with excess works in Igor as whenever a song is about excess and bravado, like “New Magic Wand” and “What’s Good” it

has the influences of the gothic soundscape front and center, while other songs either do not have it or use it subtly. According to Schlauraff,

The “rattling,” “wailing,” “thundering,” and “spluttering” that constitute the sonic environment are familiar and predominantly natural sounds heard in many of the genre's earlier works....Yet atmospheric sounds in Victorian gothic fiction are often accompanied by descriptions of haunting and haunted bodies, departing from earlier gothic texts in their more nuanced considerations of listening. In a particularly violent nightmare in *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë (1847/2003) blends the wailing wind with the “doleful cry moaning on” (p. 25) and “feeble scratching” (p. 26) of a ghostly child to reveal a spectrum of affective responses to sound. (Schlauraff 6)

“New Magic Wand” has a beat with rattling, squeaking, and cackling. The ad libs evoke the moaning of ghosts, with the phrase “please don’t leave me now” repeated over and over again. In the lead up to the beat drop, there is a sense of spluttering, or of an engine stalling over and over again. The lead up to the beat drop in “What’s Good” is similar in terms of evoking the spluttering start up of a machine, but now it coincides with the repetition of the phrase “I see the light, ending with the word light turning into a high pitched ghostly shriek as the beat drops. The line said during this shriek is “Dracula, Dracula, Dracula” which further ties the shriek to the tradition of Victorian Gothic Literature. The “I see the light” repetition continues but with less and less energy as the song goes on, ending with the line repeating as a whisper with heavy breathing in the background, definitely fitting with the idea of a feeble scratching of the Gothic soundscape. In addition to all of this, both songs and the song “Igor’s Theme” have instrumentation that evokes an organ, which Schlauraff mentions as an important part of the Gothic Soundscape. The clear Gothic influence of these songs is clear and definitely fits as a

connection to the original novel, which is one of the most known texts of Victorian Gothic literature.

So, why do these songs specifically have the most Gothic influence? Both songs happen when Igor is having an outburst of anger or ego and having his emotions on full display. While the other songs are more mellow these ones are high energy. These songs are when Igor is his most monstrous, which is why they are the most evocative of the original novel and its gothic aesthetic.

This Gothic influence is also felt in the Music videos for the album and around the album. While the song came out in the album before Igor, “Who Dat Boy” seems to have been where Tyler the creator started developing some of his ideas for Igor. The music video is heavily evocative of Gothic Science Fiction and specifically Shelly’s Frankenstein. The video starts with Tyler experimenting in his house as a beat similar to the gothic beats of “Igor’s Theme,” “New Magic Wand,” and “What’s Good” crescendos until Tyler sharply looks back at the camera and his machine explodes., scarring his face, Tyler stumbles next door where a doctor played by A\$AP Rocky sews a white face on Tyler. Tyler then drives away with a white guy in his passenger seat as the cops chase him away. I would argue that this music video was a predecessor to the Igor album in more than music style but also in theme. Tyler drives away with a white guy in the passenger seat while running away from the cops, a visual trope that normally has one's love interest in the passenger seat. And of course, there is Tyler putting on the white face through the surgery. Tyler may be showing a racial component to his romance that he explores in Igor, where he believes that he would only be truly accepted by his lover if he was white.

While the music videos in Igor do not have the overt gothic aesthetics that the “Who Dat Boy” music video did, there are still interesting elements that connect to Frankenstein. One important aspect of these videos is Tyler the Creator’s outfits. Tyler wears sunglasses, a blonde bowl cut wig, and a pantsuit in all of his music videos for Igor and while he was touring for Igor. This outfit is also the vinyl art for the album, with parts of the face not drawn in or in another pattern in order to have a patchwork effect that evokes the stitched together nature of Frankenstein’s creature. The music video for “I Think” even has Igor’s pantsuit be stitched together with different colors. The color of the pantsuits seem to represent emotions, with the blue of the “Earfquake” music video and the leadup to the album being symbolic of infatuation, the green of “A Boy is a Gun” being symbolic of envy, and the multicolored suit representing the emotional confusion Igor has during the song. Tyler’s gender nonconformity also connects to Transgender Activist Susan Stryker's connection of Transness to the literary Frankenstein. According to Stryker:

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (Stryker 245)

Tyler the Creator’s expressions of gender nonconformity thus further connect him to the literary Frankenstein’s creature. His outfit contrasts sharply with the other people in all three of the

music videos, highlighting how Igor is deeply ostracized from society. He is especially out of place in the elegant mansion of “A Boy is a Gun” where his insecurity is at a high point in the album. In a dinner scene, Igor’s love interest and his girlfriend are wearing a very light blue that clashes heavily with the bright green of Igor’s pantsuit. Igor is also positioned away from the two. The video ends with Tyler leaving the mansion towards the ocean, very evocative of the sea trip that the creature follows Victor on as they both head northward towards the arctic circle at the end of the novel.



(The *Igor* album cover and Tyler the Creator in the “Earfquake” music video)

The album *Igor* is able to explore the experiences of Black queer romance so well precisely because of the affordances that the Frankenstein Archetype allows. The Queer nature of Frankenstein as well as the use of Frankenstein to explore Black issues both give it a unique utility for Tyler the creator being able to tell his story. The themes of the album often echo the themes and plot of the novel, whether it be themes of emotional development, the cyclical nature of the novel, the creature returning to Victor at the end, the creature killing Elizabeth, and many more. The sampling and sound of the album evokes the Gothic Soundscape and also is able to call back to the novel. Finally, the visual elements of the music videos associated with *Igor* are

able to explore themes of the novel. While it is clear that *Igor* could not exist without *Frankenstein*, it is also important to consider what *Igor* adds to *Frankenstein*. The strong clear vision of *Igor* using the aesthetics of *Frankenstein* show a full reclamation of gothic horror as a tool for queer of color self exploration and expression, and will forever change how people read the original novel.

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