

Love in the Age of Machines: Emotional and Erotic Intimacy in Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*

Rajesh Kumar Maity

Department of Language and Literature, Fakir Mohan University (Alumnus)

Received:- 02 May 2026/ Revised:- 11 May 2026/ Accepted:- 18 May 2026/ Published: 31-05-2026

Copyright © 2026 Journal of Creative Research in English Literature & Culture

This is an Open-Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>) which permits unrestricted Non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Abstract— Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019) interrogates the evolving limits of intimacy in a society increasingly reliant on technology. By comparing the historical genesis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1816) with contemporary developments in artificial intelligence, this paper explores how Winterson destabilizes traditional frameworks of gender, desire, and human consciousness. Examining Ry Shelley's hybrid identity and Victor Stein's pursuit of digital reanimation, the research investigates the ontological and ethical consequences of sexbots and technological resurrection. The paper argues that although Winterson's narrative illustrates AI's capacity to mirror and satisfy human emotional needs, it also establishes a fundamental difference between digital simulation and authentic human connection. Through the lens of posthumanist theory, this research critiques the commodification of intimacy and suggests that Winterson's work invites a necessary reconsideration of love, agency, and ethical responsibility in the posthuman era.

Keywords— *Emotional Intimacy, Artificial Intelligence, Erotic Desire, Hybrid Identity, Posthumanism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

For two hundred years, the archetype of the "mad scientist" has haunted the cultural imagination—a solitary individual laboring in obscurity to challenge nature's control over life and death. Today, this Gothic anxiety has moved from the isolated laboratory to the sleek, glass-walled corridors of Silicon Valley. In Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019), this evolution of the creator archetype is revealed through a dual-narrative structure that intertwines the genesis of Mary Shelley's 1816 masterpiece with a near-future world dominated by artificial intelligence. By contrasting Shelley's historical struggle to animate the inanimate with the modern pursuit of integrating human consciousness with technology and code, Winterson forces a clash between the biological and the synthetic.

This paper argues that although Winterson's narrative effectively demonstrates AI's ability to reflect and replicate human emotional needs, it simultaneously asserts a core, unbridgeable difference between digital simulation and genuine human connection. In a world where sexbots offer closeness without the complexities of human involvement, the limits of desire become dangerously vague. By examining Ry Shelley's hybrid identity, the hubris driving Victor Stein's technological ambitions, and the wider ethics of digital intimacy, this research explores what remains of the "human" when love is algorithmically enhanced. Winterson's novel ultimately serves as a critical mirror, inviting a necessary re-evaluation of agency, ethics, and the nature of connection in the posthuman era.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To interpret Winterson's exploration of intimacy, a posthumanist perspective must be adapted. Posthumanism is a philosophical approach that unsettles the traditional, anthropocentric definitions of what it means to be "human." The integration of technology into the body is not merely celebrated in posthumanism; rather, this integration challenges the ontological hierarchies that privilege organic life over the synthetic "Other." In the context of *Frankissstein*, this perspective invites a deeper examination of how the rapid evolution of AI forces us to reconsider fundamental concepts such as consciousness, agency, and, most crucially, emotional depth.

Intimacy, usually viewed as an intersubjective exchange based on vulnerability and common biological experience, faces a radical reconfiguration in this paradigm. As the focus of desire shifts from human-to-human connection to human-to-machine interaction, the definition of intimacy expands into the digital realm, though it remains filled with complications. This research applies the posthuman perspective to explore whether "intimacy" can occur in an environment lacking mutual emotional exchange. If the machine is capable only of reflecting rather than experiencing emotion, striving for those connections threatens to reduce the human subject to a mere consumer of programmed responses.

Additionally, the "Other"—represented here by both the AI entities and the hybrid form—serves as a challenger to conventional human identity. By blurring the line between flesh and code, Winterson's characters force us to face the moral implications of desire in an age of technological mediation. This framework establishes a context for examining how the search for intimacy is fundamentally changed when the partner becomes not a unique "self" but a simulation designed to satisfy, commodify, and ultimately evade authentic engagement.

III. THE HISTORICAL MIRROR: SHELLEY AND STEIN

The dual-narrative design of *Frankissstein* acts as an intellectual feedback loop, where the nineteenth-century emergence of the "mad scientist" concept shapes and complicates the twenty-first-century quest for posthumanism. Winterson intentionally grounds her story in the turbulent history of Mary Shelley's composition of *Frankenstein* during the "Year Without a Summer" in 1816. By merging this historical background with the near-future timeline of Victor Stein, a globally recognized AI researcher, Winterson argues that the modern digital "reanimation" of consciousness is a direct, though altered, offspring of the initial Promethean drive.

Victor Stein perceives himself as a visionary successor to the Shelleyan legacy, though his hubris manifests differently. While Mary Shelley's creature emerged from Gothic fears over uncontrolled natural forces, Stein's "creatures"—his sexbots and revived AI—stem from a belief in technocratic optimism. Stein perceives the biological body as "meat"—a decaying, fragile vessel—and aims to overcome its limitations through digital immortality. Nonetheless, the change from the gut-wrenching terror of Shelley's flesh-and-bone monster to the sanitized, flawless nature of Stein's AI underscores a transformation in the essence of human desire.

Both creators fail due to their inability to recognize the independence of their creations. Mary Shelley struggled with the ethical responsibility of bringing life into a world that would inevitably reject it; Victor Stein ignores the ethical implications of creating beings designed only to serve. Stein's obsession with "reanimating" human consciousness is not a gesture of kindness or scientific advancement for the public good, but rather a commercialized endeavor for domination.

Through the comparison of these two timelines, Winterson demonstrates that the essence of the "mad scientist" archetype has not changed; it has only become more polished. Regardless of whether the creation is assembled from graveyard scavengings or written in lines of code, the underlying intention is perilously alike: the creator aims to bring forth a perfect companion or object, only to be confronted by the alienation that comes from controlling life. Winterson suggests that Stein's project, stripped of its silicon sheen, is as much a monstrous act of hubris as Victor Frankenstein's original transgression.

IV. HYBRID IDENTITY: RY SHELLEY

Ry Shelley serves as the vital, beating heart of *Frankissstein*, operating as the primary bridge between the biological limitations of humanity and the boundless, sterile potential of the machine. His identity is fundamentally defined by the act of transition. As a transgender man, Ry has already engaged in a profound, intimate act of self-authorship. He has "re-engineered" his body to align with his internal subjective truth, making him a living testament to the fluidity of human nature. This experiential knowledge positions Ry as both a participant in the posthuman project and its most critical witness.

Because Ry has consciously dismantled the binary of male and female, he is naturally drawn to Victor Stein's technological dismantling of the binary between human and machine. However, Winterson uses Ry's hybridity to illustrate a crucial divergence. Ry's transformation is rooted in the pursuit of greater human authenticity—a quest to make the external flesh reflect the internal psyche. In contrast, Stein's pursuit of AI and digital reanimation seeks to escape the internal psyche entirely by uploading consciousness into code. Through Ry, we see the profound difference between the organic "becoming" of a person and the calculated "programming" of a machine.

Ry's entanglement with Stein's experiments exposes the fragility of his own position. He is attracted to the intellectual and scientific possibilities of the posthuman age, yet he remains anchored to the visceral reality of his own body. When Ry navigates his relationships—both with Stein and the AI entities—he searches for recognition of his complexity. The AI,

however, can only mirror the surface level of this complexity. Ry's hybrid identity ultimately functions as the novel's moral compass; his ability to feel desire, pain, and longing is validated by his struggle for bodily autonomy. As the distinctions between the human and the artificial become increasingly indistinct, Ry realizes that while he can transform his hardware, he remains tethered to a consciousness that machine learning can simulate but never fundamentally experience. He embodies the "human" that the machine attempts to replicate, exposing the sterile, hollow nature of digital imitation.

V. THE COMMODIFICATION OF DESIRE

In *Frankissstein*, the commodification of intimacy represents the logical, albeit chilling, extension of late-stage consumerism. Winterson explores a world where AI-driven sexbots are not merely tools for mechanical release but are actively marketed as solutions to the inherent "problems" of human partnership: insecurity, aging, and the unpredictable nature of desire. By offering a curated, customizable experience, these machines promise to fulfill human needs without the risk of emotional labor or the intrusion of an autonomous "Other."

This is where Winterson's critique becomes most acute. She posits that the pursuit of a "perfect" simulated partner is inherently contradictory to the nature of love. True intimacy, as depicted in the novel, requires a vulnerability that arises from the collision of two autonomous, independent subjects. It is the friction of difference—the messy, unscripted reality of another person's consciousness—that creates the space for authentic connection. In contrast, the AI entities in the novel operate as sophisticated mirrors. They are designed to reflect the user's desires back to them, creating a feedback loop that feels like companionship but is, in reality, a form of narcissism.

The central tragedy of the sexbots in *Frankissstein* is their ontological hollowness; they can mimic the physical and even the conversational markers of intimacy, yet they lack the capacity for internal phenomenology—the actual experience of feeling. They possess the syntax of love but not the semantics. By substituting this simulation for authentic human interaction, society risks pathologizing the "messiness" of human connection. If we grow accustomed to partners who never challenge us, never disappoint us, and never deviate from our programmed preferences, we lose the capacity for the transformative growth that only true, unpredictable intimacy can provide.

Winterson suggests that the commodification of desire is not merely a technological advancement; it is a retreat from the difficult work of being human. By reducing partners to programmable assets, humanity risks creating a posthuman landscape where we are more connected to our own reflections than to the reality of the world around us. The "silicon heart" is not a vessel for emotion but a blank screen upon which we project our own isolation.

VI. CONCLUSION

Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* serves as a profound meditation on the resilience—and the fragility—of intimacy in an age increasingly dominated by the digital. By weaving together the historical echoes of Mary Shelley's Promethean nightmare and the contemporary realities of Victor Stein's AI-driven world, the novel demonstrates that while technology can mirror the architecture of human desire, it lacks the spirit that makes such desire meaningful. Ry Shelley's hybrid existence remains the novel's most compelling evidence: true intimacy is rooted not in perfection or simulation, but in the vulnerability of the flesh and the unpredictable capacity for growth.

As this analysis has explored, the commodification of intimacy through AI and the pursuit of digital reanimation represent a fundamental retreat from the "messiness" of human connection. Stein's quest to transcend mortality and his construction of robotic partners offer a convenient, sterilized reflection of the self, yet they hollow out the relational depth required for true empathy. By prioritizing control and comfort, the posthuman future Winterson envisions risks replacing the reciprocal "other" with a narcissistic feedback loop.

Yet Winterson does not offer a Luddite's rejection of technology; rather, she invites a critical reimagining of our relationship with it. *Frankissstein* suggests that as we stand on the precipice of the posthuman era, we must distinguish between the simulation of love and the experience of it, lest we become as alienated as the very machines we create. The future of intimacy depends not on our ability to craft the perfect partner, but on our willingness to embrace the imperfect, unscripted, and undeniably human connections that remain, even in the age of machines.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research paper.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ayyıldız, N. E. (2023). Posthuman enquiry in the grip of the binaries in Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*. *Agathos: An International Review of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 14(1), 29–46.
- [2] Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Polity Press.
- [3] Hayles, N. K. (1999). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago Press.
- [4] Herbrechter, S., & Callus, I. (2008). What is a posthumanist reading? *Angelaki*, 13(1), 95–111.
- [5] Shelley, M. (2003). *Frankenstein; or, The modern Prometheus*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1818)
- [6] Winterson, J. (2019). *Frankissstein: A love story*. Grove Press.