

Journey to Deportation: An Ecocritical Analysis of *Frankenstein*

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Abstract. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* written by Mary Shelley has themes that remain profoundly relevant today, 200 years after its publication. Tracing Victor Frankenstein's tragic loss of family and self—first through his alienation from society, then in his uneasy wanderings amid sublime landscapes, and finally in the self-destructive drive that propels him to the Arctic—this thesis reads the novel through Buell's Environmental Imagination. By unpacking these three “deportations,” it reveals how Shelley cautions against individualistic ambitions, a mechanical worldview, irresponsible scientific advancements and urges readers to reconsider the human-nature relationship.

Keywords: *Frankenstein*; Environmental Imagination; Lawrence Buell.

1. Introduction

Mary Shelley (1797-1851), a prominent English novelist, is best known for her groundbreaking work *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. As a seminal text in both Gothic and early science fiction literature, *Frankenstein* delves into the complexities of humanity's relationship with nature, which resonates with contemporary ecological concerns, making the novel a pertinent subject for ecocritical analysis.

The novel follows the ambitious scientist Victor Frankenstein, who, driven by a desire to overcome death and unlock the secrets of life, creates a human-like creature from reanimated body parts. However, upon bringing the creature to life, Victor is horrified by its appearance and abandons it. The creature, left to navigate the world alone, experiences rejection and isolation, leading to a series of tragic events that culminate in the destruction of Victor's loved ones. The story unfolds through a series of letters and embedded narratives, chronicling Victor's descent into isolation and despair.

This thesis examines the main character, Frankenstein, through the lens of Lawrence Buell's concept of the Environmental Imagination, a framework within ecocriticism that emphasizes the active role of the nonhuman environment in literature and challenges anthropocentric perspectives. By applying this theoretical approach, the study explores Victor Frankenstein's deportation from society, the natural world, and ultimately himself.

2. Theoretical Framework-Environmental Imagination

Lawrence Buell, a prominent figure in the field of ecocriticism, reshaped literary studies by exploring the relationship between literature and the environment. In 1995, Buell published his seminal work *The Environmental Imagination*, which helped establish ecocriticism as a legitimate field of study. This literary and theoretical framework explores how literature and other forms of cultural expression represent and interact with the natural world. It examines the ways humans perceive, understand, and respond to the environment, focusing on the interplay between nature, culture, and human consciousness. Buell's framework emphasizes that the environment is not merely a passive backdrop in literary narratives but an active presence that shapes and is shaped by human actions. He highlights the interconnectedness of human and natural histories, recognizing that human endeavors are deeply embedded within and influenced by the natural world. Furthermore, Buell advocates for an ethical orientation in literature, urging a reevaluation of human accountability toward the environment and promoting a more just and sustainable relationship with nature. He also views

the environment as a dynamic, ever-evolving process rather than a static entity, encouraging readers to perceive nature as an active participant in the human experience.

3. An Ecocritical Analysis of Frankenstein

3.1 An Analysis of Frankenstein's Deportation From Society

Victor Frankenstein begins his life in a nurturing social and natural environment. Not only was he immersed in his parents' love, but also in the companionship of his sister and friend. He and Elizabeth never had quarrels. He understood and appreciated Clerval's personality and ambition. He also found solace in the sublime landscapes of his Swiss home. At the age of 15, Frankenstein witnessed a violent thunderstorm. He watched its progress with "curiosity and delight" and marveled at nature's destructive power. Young Frankenstein had not yet engaged in behavior that challenged nature and human decency, at which stage he was close to family and friends, and awed by nature.

However, his fascination with uncovering nature's secrets gradually overshadowed his bonds with the loved ones. As he delves into the mysteries of life, his appreciation for the natural world diminishes, and his ambition to manipulate nature intensifies. Living in a caring community but holding his ardent passion, young Frankenstein was neither in the wilderness nor in the modern city, but in the "intermediate landscape" as described by Yi-Fu Tuan, where the balance between human and nature, countryside and city landscape is fragile[6]. This shift marks the onset of his estrangement from society.

Frankenstein saw himself as the aggressive party and nature as the defensive party. In his eyes, nature was a delicate property that he sought to understand and master, which falls into a typical mechanistic view. His disrespect for natural law, arrogant pride in human intelligence, and vain ambition to stay in the history books eventually lead him to the path of deportation. At the University of Ingolstadt, Victor's obsession with creating life consumed him. He isolated himself, neglecting correspondence with his family and immersing entirely in his experiments. This self-imposed seclusion led to physical and mental deterioration, as he became increasingly detached from human connections. Buell's concept of "human accountability to the environment" is evident here[1]; Victor's disregard for ethical considerations in his scientific pursuits resulted in personal and societal consequences.

While Frankenstein was physically isolated from his community when he was working, he was mentally separated after the birth of his creature, and the gap became deeper and deeper. The horrible creature was not as pleasant as Frankenstein had expected. In great horror and disgust, he abandoned him and avoided mentioning him in whatever circumstance. Physically, he rejoined Clerval and family members in succession. Clerval first witnessed Frankenstein's madness: "What, for God's sake, is the matter? How ill you are!" Frankenstein cried out: "Do not ask me! Oh, save me!" [5] If he had remained silent and given no explanation of his suffering, but had tried every means to solve the problem, he would have been appreciated as being stoic, enduring, and industrious, but he just renounced his responsibility for the creature and displaced extreme cowardness and selfishness in confronting the problems the creation posed[4]. This denial led to tragic outcomes, including the wrongful execution of Justine, whom Victor failed to exonerate. His silence and inaction exacerbated his guilt and further isolated him from his loved ones. Despite physical reunions with family and friends, Victor found no solace, as his internal turmoil and refusal to confront his ethical failures deepened his sense of isolation. Staying within the social environment only increased his agitation, so he had no choice but to resort to the natural environment.

3.2 An Analysis of Frankenstein's Deportation From Nature

After his social alienation, Victor Frankenstein sought solace in the natural world. Initially, nature offered him moments of tranquility; he found temporary peace in the sublime landscapes of the Alps and the serenity of Lake Geneva. These experiences evoked a sense of "astonishment," a term defined by Edmund Burke as "a feeling of climax, beyond pain and rationality, which can be experienced by

the witness of extreme beauty.” [2] Frankenstein would feel relieved by the immense mountains and precipices, the sound of the river, and the dashing of the waterfalls—“They had then filled me with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul, and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy.” [5]

However, this communion with nature was fleeting. Despite the grandeur surrounding him, Frankenstein's inner turmoil persisted. He acknowledged that the scenery, while magnificent, could not alleviate his grief. This aligns with Buell's assertion that in environmental literature, the nonhuman environment is not merely a backdrop but an active presence that reflects and influences human experience[1]. Frankenstein's inability to find lasting comfort in nature suggests a disconnection from this dynamic relationship.

The reason why he could not cure himself by astonishment in nature may lie in his failure to modify his perception of human-nature relationships. While some critics such as Zhang and Fredricks may argue that the sublime beauty made him realize the smallness and inferiority of mankind[3,7], Shelley's description of Frankenstein's reflection may reveal that he was still driven by a heroic ambition to conquer and expand. Victor's perception of nature remained anthropocentric; he viewed it as a resource to be studied and mastered rather than a living entity with intrinsic value. Even when confronted with the overwhelming power of natural forces, he responded with a desire to conquer and penetrate its mysteries, rather than with humility or reverence. This perspective prevented him from fully engaging with the environment as an interconnected system, a concept emphasized in Buell's framework.

Nature's deportation was obvious after he heard the creature's story. He felt the eternal twinkling of the stars weighed upon him, and every blast of wind was as if an approaching monster[5]. He could not feel attached to nature but criticized by nature. He found it hard to appreciate nature's beauty on his journey to Scotland. As Frankenstein's journey continued, his detachment from nature deepened. He became increasingly indifferent to the landscapes that once inspired him, perceiving them as monotonous and barren. This shift reflects Buell's idea that the environment in literature is a process, constantly changing and influencing human consciousness. Victor's failure to adapt to this dynamic leads to his further isolation and despair[1].

Ultimately, Frankenstein's estrangement from nature underscores the ethical implications of his actions. His refusal to acknowledge the interconnectedness of human and natural histories resulted in a profound sense of alienation. Unable to appreciate the deep connection between man and nature, he eventually went helpless and lonely in the universe.

3.3 An Analysis of Frankenstein's Deportation From Himself

Victor Frankenstein's progressive alienation—from society, nature, and ultimately himself—culminated in a profound internal estrangement that underscores the ethical dimensions of his transgressions. After he refused to make a mate for the creature, the creature resolved to destroy his happiness by killing his family and friends one after another. But Frankenstein had such excessive concern for himself that only his own death worried him. Turning a blind eye to Elizabeth's well-being, he decided to marry her despite knowing that the creature might take revenge on them—“I should almost regard the fiend as invincible... But death was no evil to me if the loss of Elizabeth were balanced with it.”[5]

Having lost William, Justine, and Clerval, Frankenstein was still unaware of Elizabeth's unsafety but only considered his possession of her. On his wedding night, in his heroic, great, and brave attempt to fight the creature to death, he suffered from Elizabeth's death. Soon followed his father's death. In extreme pain and grief, he swore to live only to kill the creature. At that moment, the mountain echoed the swear, as if surrounded him with “mockery and laughter” [5]. He had lost all his social relations, and neither would nature sympathize with him. In the aftermath, Frankenstein's pursuit of the creature becomes a hollow endeavor, devoid of genuine purpose. He admits—“I pursued my path towards the destruction of the daemon more as a task enjoined by heaven... than as the ardent desire of my soul.”

This mechanical pursuit signifies his complete detachment from his former self, driven not by passion but by a sense of obligation. Buell emphasizes that "some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text,"[1] highlighting the dynamic interplay between individuals and their surroundings. Frankenstein's inability to adapt to the evolving consequences of his actions reflects his failure to engage with this processual view of the environment. Without any ambition fulfilled or any goal achieved, he could never acknowledge and reconcile with himself.

4. Conclusion

Frankenstein's tragedy of being deported by the social environment, natural environment, as well as himself warns readers to reconsider the human-nature relationship. His journey highlights the consequences of disregarding the interconnectedness in nature and the potential for destruction when individualistic ambition overrides one's ability to shoulder responsibility. In conclusion, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* transcends a mere gothic narrative, offering a profound exploration of the ethical and ecological ramifications of human ambition. Victor's tragic tale serves as a timeless reminder of the necessity to respect the interconnectedness of all life forms and to approach scientific and technological advancements with humility and responsibility. Through Buell's ecocritical lens, the novel emerges as a compelling critique of anthropocentrism and a call to reevaluate our relationship with the natural world.

References

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