

The Female Anxiety Embodied In The Gothic Novel: Frankenstein

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Abstract. Female Gothic Fiction - Frankenstein is a revealing tale of female anxiety and terror that not only has a distinctly Gothic sublime appeal, but also boldly reflects Shelley's female anxiety brought on by authorship and family ties through the absence of female discourse, the metaphor of the monster as a woman, and the appropriation of female fertility by men.

Keywords: Frankenstein; Female Anxiety; Gothic Novel.

1. Introduction

As a genre of English romantic literature, Gothic fiction appealed to the reading taste of the British people in the 19th century, "It remained a popular, if controversial, literary mode throughout what we still call the Romantic period in European literature (the 1790s through the early 1830s), now especially well known as the era of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818)." The term "Female Gothic" was firstly used in the British literary critic Ellen Moers' *Literary Women: Great Writers* (1976), where she suggested that female writers had begun to create Gothic fictions since the eighteenth century. The "terror" expressed in female Gothic and the "terror" in the hearts of women share the same root since women's existential difficulties were brought by their innate gender under the cultural background of patriarchal society. Frankenstein has been interpreted by numerous critics through the lens of modern theories such as Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, queer theory, ecological criticism, and postcolonial criticism. This paper is going to explore the within the field of female Gothic, trying to figure out the source of Mary Shelly's anxiety and how is it being exposed, and why has it been favorably received since its publication in 1818.

2. Frankenstein Carries with Mary Shelly's Anxiety as a Woman

Frankenstein is a female Gothic novel, not only because it is written by a female writer--Mary Shelly, but also because it expresses the anxieties and worries of being a woman from several perspectives: familial, social, political and ideological. Mary Shelly was best known for writing Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus (1818, revised 1831), an early example of science fiction finished when she was 19 years old. As a female writer in the beginning of the 19th century, Mary Shelly's anxiety was associated with authorship. She came from an extraordinary family which influenced her work—her father William Godwin (1756-1836) was a leading radical anarchist of the 1790s; her mother Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was a pioneering radical feminist and the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Furthermore, the preface of Frankenstein was written by her husband Percy Shelley (1792-1822), a world-famous Romantic poet. Therefore, surrounded by the glorious intelligence of her relatives, she herself seldom appeared as an independent figure, but as Percy Shelley's second wife or as the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, and her world-shaking masterpiece was first mentioned only in works of literary criticism on Percy Shelley's poetry. Mary's anxiety about authorship culminated at the Villa Diodati in the summer of 1816, when she and Percy Shelley, together with Lord Byron and his personal physician John William Polidori initiated a ghost story contest. At that moment, she was caught by a blank incapability of invention which was the greatest misery of authorship.

Furthermore, Mary Shelly's unease was rooted in her family life. She lost her mother shortly after she was born. Worse still, after her father remarried, he was busy with his career and neglected the

education and care for her. Later, her elopement with Percy Shelley led her to be abandoned by her father and criticized by the society. Her husband's extreme idealism and radical "free love" (Percy spent a lot of time with her stepmother's daughter Claire during Mary's pregnancy) made her physically and mentally exhausted, lacking a sense of security in marriage. And the premature death of her first child forced her to question her ability to be a responsible mother.

3. Literature References

Frankenstein was narrated entirely under the voice of men. In the form of epistolary novel, Shelly used the story-within-a-story method of narration to divide her masterpiece into three narrative levels. First, Captain Robert Walton told his sister Mrs. Saville what he saw in the Arctic, but with no post office in the remote North Pole, and no response from his sister, the communication was completely one-sided, which indicated women's collective silence and absence that their gender brought to them. The second was the maniac biologist Victor Frankenstein explained the process of creating the monster to his friend, during which time his mother Caroline, his fiancée Elizabeth, and maid Justine were mentioned. They perfectly fit the traditional male imagination and requirements of women who were "family angels", the puppet-like and loyal defenders of family and marriage: quiet, obedient, selfless, content, self-denying, taking housework and domestic trifles as their lifelong career. On the third narrative level, the monster told Frankenstein about his experiences after being abandoned when appeared an image of siren--Safie. Contrary to sanctified "angel", this demonized woman led to the misfortune of the families of De Lacey. In a nutshell, on all three levels of narrative, men seemed to be in complete control, through which the novel completed the identity shaping of traditional women: either absent, or regarded as angels, or exiled as demons.

Frankenstein's monster, in several ways, was actually the embodiment of women, and the fate of the monster was a metaphor for the fate of women. Firstly, in the historical context of female writing at the end of the 18th century, Mary Shelly was born to be an Eve because of fertility, but her status as a woman writer made her a "fallen angel" in patriarchal society, which was the same way the monster called himself after committing numerous horrible crimes: "I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel." Like thousands of women glowing faintly under the dust of history, the monster was anonymous from the beginning of the novel to the end. Secondly, the time that Frankenstein exerted to create the monster precisely equaled the gestation period of women, both were extremely laborious process full of pains and hardships. Thirdly, in the initial days of his birth, this man-made monster was warm-hearted, had goodwill and gratitude towards people. However, after receiving the hostility and rejection, he took a fierce revenge against the unjust world, which could be explained from the words of Rousseau, the Romantic philosopher, who pointed out that all children were born to be kind, but if they had not received enough care and love from their mothers in time, the children might become morally bankrupt, and "will become more of a monster than others", which was the same fate that women forced to face in the 19th century in Europe. Last but not least, Victor Frankenstein wholeheartedly dedicated himself in the creation of the monster, but when the creating process came to an end with disgusting and terrible results, the monster was mercilessly abandoned by him because of its ugly appearance: "no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be as hideous as that wretch." The fate of the innocent monster was very similar to the misfortune of women: females had received the same thoughtful care before birth as males, but with less attention after birth on account of their underprivileged gender.

From Zeus swallowing his pregnant wife Metis into stomach and Prometheus creating human beings out of clay in Greek Mythology, to Frankenstein producing a monster out of dead body parts, men have often been represented as yearning for reproductive capacity. Frankenstein, while performing reproductive replacement in the imaginary world, was deeply afraid of women in the real world: he dreamed that his fiancée become the dead mother: "her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw

the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel”; he tore the unfinished female monster to pieces due to his fear of the uncontrollably generative power in the female monster, the power of “resistance to authority” which was easily to be out of control.

4. Frankenstein Catered to the Taste for Sublime Beauty of Female Readers

“The early success of the gothic genre is a function of the defacto but nonetheless effective concentration of women brought about by social constraints on their placement within society” showed the extreme popularity of Gothic fictions among the middle-class women, as well as its connection with women’s constraints in social life. At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, Europe was undergoing transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism in tandem. The middle class was relatively well-off while women were still attached to of the patriarchal society, who were confined at home and fed up with domesticity. Lacking adventure and passion, they naturally took reading as a sensible tool to kill time and delightfully found that female Gothic fictions provided them an imaginable space to tackle perplexities and reduce pressure, which echoed their subconsciously deep-seated desires. The middle-class women embarked on a spiritual adventure without casualties but with sublime beauty because when people look at the source of danger from a safe distance, it’s just thrill to the terror, rather than the real announcement of doom, and an indirect and intense feeling of exhilaration will be evoked. Human beings will never be threatened by the gloomy fate for what they really desire is going outside and even beyond themselves, just as Frankenstein sighed: “How mutable are our feelings, and how strange is that clinging love we have of life even in the excess of misery!” Gothic writing techniques were excellent weapons to expose the persecution of hierarchy, patriarchy, marriage and church education system on women.

In Frankenstein, the intimate experiences of witnessing the death of her loved ones was traumatic for Shelley. Apart from her mother’s death which closely followed her own birth, Percy Shelly’s first wife’s suicide legalized he and Mary’s marriage, and the death of her first child also resulted in countless pain upon her. In consequence, death played as the narrative tone of Frankenstein: the body of the monster was pieced together from dead body parts “by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs”; the whole story was built around the deaths of Frankenstein’s relatives and himself.

5. Conclusion

Mary Shelly’s Frankenstein is a horror story revealing female anxiety and horror which not only has a distinct Gothic sublime charm, but also boldly reflects the Shelly’s female anxiety brought by authorship and family relationship through the absence of female discourse, the metaphor of the monster as a woman, and man’s usurpation of female fertility.

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