

Frankenstein and the Gothic Sublime

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Mary Shelley, a British famous female writer in the 19th century, wrote *Frankenstein* in 1818, which was regarded as a noted classic gothic fiction. The gothic style enriches the connotation of the novel and endows her works with a mysterious sublimity in such a way as to carry gothic novels into a new stage of development. This article attempts to analyze the gothic sublime of *Frankenstein* commencing from sublime theories of Longinus, Burke and Kant and the definition of the father of gothic novels Horace Walpole's "gothic". The study finds that the gothic sublime of *Frankenstein* is mainly embodied in three aspects as ugliness, the production of the monster and the torture by an endless terror.

Keywords: *Frankenstein*, the gothic sublime, Mary Shelley

Introduction

In the novel *Frankenstein*, the title character Victor Frankenstein is an unorthodox scientist who attempts to challenge the conventional concept that only God created human beings, working insanely hard in his laboratory for many days to build a creature through assembling the organs from different dead bodies. At last Frankenstein successfully brings it to life, but he is horrified by the creature's ugliness. The monster has a good nature and felt gratitude to people at the beginning. However, when he attempted to fit into human society, he was shunned because of his hideously ugly semblance, which led him to hate and ruin everything. He begins to revenge himself on his creator Frankenstein who abandoned him. Frankenstein's friends and relatives are killed by the monster one by one. Therefore, Frankenstein swears to take revenge for their deaths but unfortunately loses his life in the pursuit of the gigantic monster. Upon finding his creator dead, the monster then vanishes in the North Pole. There are usually lots of discussions on the gothic features of this work but the articles are generally without exploration into the level of sublimity related to the gothic part in this term. This article attempts to analyze sublimity of the gothic in *Frankenstein* from classic Longinus', Burckian and Kantian sublime theories to the commentary about the "gothic" of the father of gothic novels Horace Walpole.

Features of the Gothic and the Sublime

The gothic, a kind of special romantic literature genre, was born in the middle of the 18th century, namely "dark romanticism" with horror and romantic love as the typical characters. This darkness is mainly manifested in two aspects: one is rendering the horror and violence on the plot; the other is revealing evil of the society,

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politics, church and morality on the subject to explore the dark side of human nature. The symbolism of darkness is: darkness is a basic taboo color in the Western countries. It means disaster, destruction and death. According to the explanation of Cambridge Dictionary, in addition to the meaning of “mysterious, evil, obscure, depression, sorrow”, dark or black color is also related with the supernatural (especially the devil). As stated in Horace Walpole (1717-1797)’s *The Castle of Otranto*, gothic is mainly defined as horror, mystery, super nature, misfortune, death or family curse. However, Horace did not mention sublimity. The connection between the gothic and the sublime begins with Morris (299-319)’s remarks that sublimity was quite normal and important part in gothic novels. Nadal (2000, pp. 373-387) also reviews the gothic sublime was a kind of “longing for plenitude, infinity—even transcendence—opposed by self-destructive drives” and “the Gothic—negative, oceanic—sublimes” which combines both Kantian’s sublime theory and the gothic sublime theory of Mishra (1994, pp. 19, 225). Tuite (141-55) exemplifies that monstrosity is a unique gothic monstrous sublime of *Frankenstein*. However, LI (2004, pp. 68-96) cites Thomson’s view that the grotesque has dual psychological effect, namely, it both liberates or disarms and creates anxiety. Mary Shelley elaborates a little about Frankenstein’s experimentation with the monster though, it is not hard to see that the experiment of cutting organs off the corpses in the graveyard to construct a creature was indeed grotesque. The depiction of this procedure enhances the mysteriousness and quaintness of this novel, which not only provides readers with a sudden horror, but also elevates the novel into sublimity. The successful application of first-person narration makes the story all the more frightening as the narration of this grotesque story from the characters sounds like a real experience—like an extraordinary event in ordinary life, rather than a fabricated novel, which dovetails nicely with the above definition of the “gothic”. Nevertheless, the sensible readers will question the “verisimilitude” immediately. There is a tension between first-person narration and readers’ sensibility, which boosts the grotesque of the novel and inspires the reader’s imagination, and also further deepens the theme and imbues the novel with great artistic appeal and effect. *Frankenstein* is comprised of three narrators—Victor, the captain Walton and the monster. All the narration makes the story more believable.

There is another thing could manifest the gothic sublime is sanguinary murder. It is most capable of evoking a psycho—and physiological response in us that has come to be connected with fear, for it impresses us with convulsing visual stimuli. In the novel, Shelley visualizes the terrifying scene through her depiction of the monster’s capricious behavior and the plot that the monster takes revenge by killing Victor’s kinsfolk: when Victor refuses to create a female companion for the monster, the monster curses he will be with Victor on his wedding night and finally the monster kills Victor’s bride:

Great God! Why did I not then expire! Why am I here to relate the destruction of the best hope and the purest creature on earth? She was there, lifeless and inanimate. (Shelley, 2011, p. 298)

Victor’s suffering demonstrates the monster’s violence that certainly scares the readers. Moreover, the frightful plot is arranged on the wedding night, which makes the story even more painful and delightful. This could demonstrate as a kind of sublimity in the terms of Burkian theory that sublimity is something could evoke the most exciting emotion of humans (Burke, 1998, p. 36).

Burkian sublimity expounds that what is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror,

is a source of the sublime. That is, the strongest emotion produces sublimity (Burke, 1998, p. 36). But as pain is stronger in its operation than pleasure, so death is in general a much more affecting idea than pain. There is no pain, no matter how intense it is, can exceed the shock brought by death. As death is the most fearful thing, danger has to be modified in order to inspire sublime feeling. In *Frankenstein*, Victor's younger brother William, his servant and adopted daughter Justine, friend Henry, wife Elizabeth are killed sequentially, and Victor's father passes away as he is deeply traumatized. Victor exhausts himself into death when revenge has filled his mind. A succession of bloody killings couldn't make the novel more frightening.

The characters' aspiration, supernatural elements, somber atmosphere, and symbolization of the landscape in *Frankenstein*, not only represent Burckian's sublimity, but also construct a strong atmosphere of gothic novel, which evokes the feelings of fear, pain, danger in the readers and greatly overwhelms and impresses them. Meanwhile, the novel warns that people should set a moral boundary of science research and unignore the inner beauty.

The Sublime Theories of Longinus, Burke and Kant

Longinus

Longinus, born in ancient Rome, spoke highly of masculinity. The masculine beauty is mainly reflected in images full of motion and tension, which means the embedded meaning that will abruptly change accordingly. Then, most of images are overwhelming and overpowering, and the employed ones are usually significant and striking. In *Frankenstein*, the masculine beauty is first illustrated by Victor's perseverance as he unremittingly pursues his beloved career, then by the monster's supernatural powers, such as surviving in a frozen area, running super-fast, and being astute like a man as he takes advantage of Victor's vengefulness and then retaliates against him. LI (1999, pp. 61-63) generalizes a conclusion from Longinus's concepts: the sublime style is the echo of the great soul; when a great person is proudly standing before us as our competitor, our souls will be elevated to an ideal height. What Victor has done is regarded as the typical thing only God can do, namely "man creates man" in the 18th-19th century. He conducts many experiments, during which he views the "Creator" as his competitor, and therefore his soul is elevated to an ideal height according to the above logic. Scientists will break rules and resist authorities in their quest of the extreme beauty of knowledge zenith. To some extent, although they overstep the boundary or so, their souls are hoisted to a sublime height. In *Frankenstein*, Victor learned to crave for, pursue, and imitate God to create a life. The monster he creates knows how to use fire just like the encounter of Prometheus, which also shows sublimity.

Burke

PENG (2004, pp. 289-295) sums up British empiricism philosophers' research on human conscious activities and he holds there are two different schools: empiricists leading by John Locke and by Haws. The former places emphasis on recognition and sense perception and investigates concepts and their associations, while the latter places emphasis on instinct and emotion and investigates desires, feelings and so on. And Burke abides by Locke's principles on the epistemology, and he also insists that human's cognition and knowledge should be determined only by experience derived from sense perception. As indicated by Burke's theory, the things which brings sublimity are violent in perspective of strength, spectacular in perspective of quality, extrasensory in perspective of vehicle. Our senses are influenced by power, obscurity, boundlessness, continuity,

consistency and “painful pleasures”, all of which are related to masculine “sublimity”. In his theory, the fallible human mind cannot entirely grasp infinite things. Therefore, the concreteness and clarity cannot achieve such a result as being linked with finite things, because once the things are noticeable or observable, they will not possibly psychologically stimulate emotion in human. “A clear concept” is equal to “a small concept”, and clearly noticing something is equal to observing something.

Burke maintained that the sensual quality of sublime objects requires the objects to have several features as following: first, that is the vastness in size, which is the most obvious difference between sublimity and beauty. Compared with normal men, the monster created by Frankenstein has more powerful muscles and arteries, and he can bear the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to his frame, and he is physically stronger in every aspect, such as feet, arms. Except his appearance (Victor attempted to make a beautiful creation at first), all other features turns to be as same as Victor intended. The monster is made as a gigantic stature, that is to say, about eight feet in height (about 2.4 meters), far exceeding average men (Shelley, 2011, p. 91). Thus, there is masculine sublimity in his appearance.

Secondly, obscurity is another aspect of sublimity. Obscure things call forth sublimity due to terror and uncertainty. When we know how exactly dangerous it will be, we feel much less terrified and we feel no sublimity. When we don't know the extent of the danger, we probably suspect and fear a lot. Obscure things will yield greater force, and then bring forth feeling of sublimity. *Frankenstein* is known for its obscure ending. It distinguishes itself from traditional stories which always end either in tragedy or in comedy as *Frankenstein* ends with no ending. Does the monster die? While the monster say he would burn himself into death, Victor created him with the idea that “Why should a man die? Will a man come back to his life after his death? Can I make an immortal body?” (Shelley, 2011, p. 81). The monster may not die. He is shunned universally because of his ugly appearance, and even abandoned by his “father” or creator who is the only person with whom the monster has any sort of earthly relationship. However, the blind old man in De Lacey's house is the only man who treats him with kindness. The monster is the outcome of Victor's plan of “man makes man”. Some innocent people die from the monster's vengefulness as he has received unbearable beatings and disgust after birth. For instance, Victor's younger brother William, his servant and adopted daughter Justine, his friend Henry, his wife Elizabeth, and his father all died of the monster's resentful revenge. They were kind-hearted people. The monster, despite cruelly killing so many people, describes him as having good dispositions and he uses extreme labor to rescue a young girl from drowning, merely to be rewarded with a gunshot, which urges readers wonder why they die, and if the monster will live with solitude if he doesn't perish. A story like this will arouse the emotions of compassion, sadness and pain in readers, which makes them to ponder for a longer period, and then purifies the inner hearts. This strong touched feeling with gothic features could be interpreted as sublimity.

Thirdly, unfamiliarized power is a factor for arousing the sublime. Powerful animals terrify humans as their power would generate destruction and damage. Once the power is harmless and human can utilize it, then, the animals are not the sublime objects any more. God's power is the most striking virtue. God is always just and benevolent though, humans are spontaneously awed by his omnipotence. In gothic novels, Frankenstein employs science power as his supernatural capacity which hasn't yet been verified to be effective, and he brings the power into full play. In contrast, Humans are, much weaker, and powerless. Shelley takes full advantage of this contrast by making Victor go against God, and the monster acquires knowledge of fire and human language, even being

capable of analyzing human's psychology to realize his revenge, which therefore makes a sublime power in *Frankenstein* to the readers. When he began to study the most common and natural human feelings—pain and pleasure, Burke asserts that the ideas of pain will arouse sublimity feeling in humans as they are productive of the strongest emotion which brings sublimity (Burke, 2011, p. 36).

Kant

In light of the above expatiation on Burkian sublimity, we can deduce that the vastness can inspire a sublime feeling. Nevertheless, there has many ways to define the “vastness”. Vast oceans, magnificent rivers and mountains, and the infinite North Pole, all of them can be described as “vast”. Moreover, humans' minds are the vastest compared to the front things. The things which excite strong emotion of humans can be defined as sublime objects. WANG (2000, pp. 14-19) analyzes Burkian and Kantian aesthetics of the sublime and points out that Burke was the first philosopher to argue that the sublime and the beautiful are mutually exclusive, and Kant didn't totally agree with Burke's theory, as he was not satisfied with Burke's simple analysis on experience (psychology), and Kant established his exclusive theory on aesthetics of the sublime by putting forward that the category of the sublime is boundless. Evidently, the significance of Kant's aesthetics lies in not only itself, but also that his transcendental philosophy has bridged the gap between the phenomenal and sensible world. That is, based on Kantian theory that “beauty as the symbol for morality” (Kant, 1987, p. 228). The moral teaching in *Frankenstein* is obviously manifestation of the sublime feeling: Victor insists on “man makes man”, despite the fact that only God can invent human. Although he is very ambitious in seeking the truth and extreme science, he is less humane as he abandons the monster on account of his hideous appearance, which makes the monster live only with hatred and vengefulness, but no love. The ending is miserable because Shelley defines morality as what goes around comes around. And the novel also alerts those scientists like Frankenstein and the privileged class to the science boundary and humanity, and the voice from the marginalized vulnerable group.

Frankenstein and the Gothic Sublime

Ugliness

In *Frankenstein*, the most gothic thing is that the monster is ruthlessly abandoned and unloved just because he is ugly and he revenges horrifically, which evoke a tragic emotion of the readers. He was given up by his own father and unacceptable by the human society for this ugliness make the terror hatred of him for revenge. Compared with ugliness, beauty could produce the aesthetic and emotional social intercourse of acceptance. Whereas ugliness is often relentlessly rejected by the society. As Fredricks (1996, pp. 178-189) analyses the tragedy and the causes of the monster and states briefly: “society's valorization of the beautiful is responsible for the monster's abandonment and abusive treatment”.

The Production of the Monster

Mary Shelley was living in the 19th century when only women and God could create mankind, and if a man creates a man, he is just doing an extremely abnormal and terrifying thing considering that he is challenging God with a sublime atmosphere and this horror and terror thing is gothic indeed. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley's conception of the plot of “man creates man” is grotesque and horrible: “If people know that I (Victor) am attempting to infuse life into an inanimate body, I will be punished by the Church as I am trespassing on God's

realm, which only monsters will do” (Shelley, 2011, pp. 89-100). Here it shows Victor says “I collected bones from charnel-houses and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame”. “To collect materials, I went to a graveyard to cut them off; and I went to the execution ground where nobody dares to go, to cut the organs I need off the corpses.” (Shelley, 2011, p. 92) Victor also feels frightened while doing that but he is so obsessed with his dream and future success that he forgets his family and friends. He knows that his father worries about him, but he write little letters to his father. He completely devotes himself to his work.

However, this quote presents how the monster is horrifically created by the crazy and exciting scientist and after the producing is complete how ugly he is and for his ugliness he is abandoned by the creator Victor:

when, 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 ... when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. (Shelley, 2011, pp. 95-96)

Grotesque situations like this have dual psychological effects, namely, it both liberates or disarms and creates anxiety (LI, 2004, p. 68). Frankenstein’s experiment of cutting organs off the corpses in a churchyard to build a creature is indeed a grotesque try, though he wants to make a contribution to science. Hence, the novel *Frankenstein* is infused with mystery and oddness, which then makes readers panicked and curious about what will happen next. Especially, when readers find that Victor abandons the “deformed child” on which he has spent two years as he is unexpectedly hideous, the readers cannot help pitying the poor “child” who was reluctantly brought into this world, which elevate this Gothic novel a sublime height with evoking an intense emotion. “Giving birth to a baby” is very common in family life. However, in this novel, it is a man that gives birth to a “child” and the man selfishly abandons his “child”. The story borders on both reality and unreality and it arouses the ideas of danger and fear in readers at a distance, which are consistent with the definition of Gothic and sublime. There is a tension between the novel and reality, and the tension intensifies the grotesque and inspires readers’ imagination, which highlights the theme, and imbues the novel with artistic appeal in a Gothic manner.

The Torture by An Endless Terror

As Burke said, not all the pain and pleasure will inevitably cause sublimity, and horror is the main part of sublimity, but the horror caused by the sublime objects is different from that caused by jeopardizing human’s life, “When pleasure or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience” (Burke, 1998, pp. 36-37). It implies that humans need to perceive danger but the danger shouldn’t be too uncomfortably in their vicinity or their instincts for self-preservation will be activated, resulting in complete pain instead of the sublime. Therefore, the danger should never press too far or too close, and the horror keeps the real danger at a distance. Hence, the sublimity comes into being. Besides, in the social world, among the strongest feelings related to sublimity “sympathy” plays an important role. Burke holds that sympathy is the strongest feeling among these passions we show to others, by which we enter into the concerns of others (Burke, 1998, pp. 41-45). The horror caused by the solid danger only brings forth pain, while the horror caused by the sublime object will be transformed from pain into pleasure. Burke explains: the most important reason why the danger can bring forth pleasure is that the danger keeps from being real danger and sympathy also helps. In the literature, the effects of tragedy are determined by sympathy. When pleasure or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of

giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful (ZHU, 1979, p. 238). It demonstrates that the sublime comes into being when we experience danger at a distance, knowing we are safe from the real harm. Thus, the horror caused by the sublime object could be transformed into a pleasure owing to a weaker sense of danger and other reasons. This viewpoint implies the later so-called psychological distance.

In *Frankenstein*, the monster tortures Frankenstein and continually threatens him instead of killing his “father” directly, thus this behavior drives Frankenstein mostly mad and this strong emotion change becomes a gothic sublime. For brutal vengeance, he kills Frankenstein’s younger brother William, his servant and adopted daughter Justine, his friend Henry, his wife Elizabeth sequentially, and he tortures Frankenstein and his family in both physical and psychological ways, which is also the reason that Frankenstein’s father dies. The monster also knows Victor is vengeful, and he figures out when and where Victor will appear. During his slaughtering, the monster sometimes informs Victor of his plan; for example, he says to Victor “I shall be with you on your wedding-night” (Shelley, 2011, p. 259), but sometimes he executes his plan without notice, and he acts like an intelligent man, who succeeds in imputing someone’s death to others; for instance, he kills William and then puts William’s picture locket necklace into Justine’s pocket. All of these torture Victor, and under such circumstances, he can neither live nor die. Thus, the terror reaches a peak. Meanwhile, Victor ultimately refuses to create a female companion for the monster for fear that they would have a baby monster, and then the monster family would pose a threat to human beings. The ending of this novel is ambiguous: we don’t know for sure that the monster carries out his intention of burning himself to death. Will he continue his revenge on human beings? Will he have offspring with a human being after a facial plastic surgery? Or will he acquire new skills and produce a female monster by himself? We have no answers for these questions. Anyway, his supernatural power scares human beings. Apparently, this uncertain continuing terror is the gothic sublime.

Conclusion

To sum up, for writing the novel *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley was affected by the traditional gothic novel, and successfully applied various elements of the gothic. The gothic elements are reflected in many plots, for example, the monster has a hideous appearance, who is abandoned afterward and then seeks revenge through brutal murder; Victor undertakes his experiment of “man makes man” in the name of scientific progress; the monster is trying to gain an insight to the father of Victor’s character—someone’s mental state. Therefore, he can torture him freely and imperceptibly. In perspective of the sublime theories of Longinus, Burke and Kant, Mary Shelley elevated her gothic novel to the sublime by describing the vastness, unfamiliarized power, feelings of emptiness, innocence, and solitude of the monster, and the infinity that Victor seeks in the scientific world, the infinity that Walton explores in the North Pole, the majesty of nature (the Alps, the Arctic, and the stormy and rugged shores of Scotland) (Fredricks, 1996, pp. 178-189) and its connotations. In the novel, Shelley also explored the boundary between the scientific pursuit and the ethical by making tragedy of the relationship of *Frankenstein* with the monster in contradictions and conflicts between human race and technology progress.

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