

The Creature's Tourist Gaze and Identity Construction in *Frankenstein*

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Abstract

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* depicts the tragic fate of the creature under multiple layers of the social gaze, revealing the violent disciplinary mechanisms of 19th-century Western society rooted in scientific rationality and cultural hegemony. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of the gaze and John Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze", this paper analyzes the creature's identity crisis, its efforts to construct an identity, and its ultimate deconstruction under the gaze. It demonstrates how social gaze perpetuates oppression through visual politics, spatial discipline, and cultural symbolism, offering a new lens for understanding power and identity construction.

Keywords

Mary Shelley; *Frankenstein*; tourist gaze; identity construction.

1. Introduction

Mary Shelley remains one of the most influential figures in Gothic and science fiction literature. At 18 years old, Shelley penned *Frankenstein* (The Modern Prometheus) (1818). It is a novel that not only redefined Gothic fiction but also laid the foundation for the science fiction genre. *Frankenstein* tells the story of scientist Victor Frankenstein, who creates a monster, abandons it for fear. The creature begins to take revenge for loneliness and pain, and finally leads to a series of tragedies.

The gaze theory of Foucault lays the foundation for Urry's gaze. The term gaze is an act of looking fixedly or intently, as it is explained in the OED. It originates from the French term regard, and is put forth by Michel Foucault. In his sense, the subject is gazed upon by knowledge power and disciplined under the eye-of-power. Based on Foucault's medical gaze, John Urry puts forward the concept of the tourist gaze with its emphasis on visual consumption in tourism. The tourist gaze is "socially organised and systematised as is the gaze of the medic" (Urry and Larsen 1). Tourists' ways of looking are manipulated by social discourses and practices through various mediums.

In *Frankenstein*, as an alienated existence, the creature's identity formation is always under the violent discipline of social gaze. Current research on *Frankenstein* mostly focuses on scientific ethics, patriarchy criticism or the romantic tradition, while the exploration of identity construction from the perspective of "tourist gaze" is still insufficient. This paper focuses on the interaction between the gaze mechanism and identity politics, analyzing how the creature becomes the object of social power's gaze, and thereby revealing the oppression logic of 19th-century science and humanism discourse on marginalized subjects.

2. The Creature's Identity Crisis

2.1. The creature as "the object of the gaze"

As Urry and Larsen imply, the gaze can exert a form of violence, and the visual power constructs social hierarchies by assigning meaning to objects. The violence of gaze lies in its ability to exert

pressure on the observed object through visual behavior, making it feel uncomfortable as if it were being controlled and evaluated. In *Frankenstein*, the creature's appearance becomes the focal point of this violent gaze: his stitched-together body is socially perceived as a symbol of the "unnatural". Here, the gaze operates as a form of violence, excluding the creature from the moral community. This kind of pressure can be a psychological oppression and may even lead to behavioral changes. Gaze is not merely watching. It lies more in its ability to endow the observed object with specific meanings. This assignment of meaning is subjective and reflects the power structure and values of the observer. Social hierarchy is constructed and maintained through the meaning bestowed by gaze. Those individuals or groups that can dominate the gaze and define meaning are often at the upper level of power. The objects that are gazed upon and defined may be at the lower level of power. Additionally, *Frankenstein's* scientific gaze objectifies the creature as a tool. The creature confronts this in his monologue: "Am I but a specimen to satisfy your curiosity?" (Shelley 35). Such gaze negates his subjectivity and reduces his cultural identity to a marginalized "non-human" existence.

The legitimacy of anatomy in the 19th century was built on the illegal acquisition of corpses, such as grave robbing and the use of the bodies of executed criminals, a phenomenon that exposed the class exploitation behind the scientific gaze. Anatomy schools in London often purchased corpses from slums, and the bodies of the poor and criminals were transformed into the "raw materials" for medical progress. Mary Shelley implicitly criticizes this ethical dilemma in the novel: Victor's act of collecting body parts from "slaughterhouses and anatomy rooms" (Shelley 56) is actually the plundering of the bodies of the lower class by scientific elites. And the process of creating the monster symbolizes the dehumanization of labor in the industrial age. The creature is a symbol of the collage of "proletarian bodies" (Hou 72). In "Discipline and Punish", Foucault emphasizes that power achieves discipline through the collusion of "knowledge and body" (28). By establishing medical standards for the normal human body, anatomy defines bodies that do not conform to the norms as abnormal, thereby rationalizing their exclusion or transformation. The stitched body of the creature, deviating from the standards of anatomy, is regarded by villagers as non-human, which is precisely the manifestation of this power logic: scientific gaze consolidates social order through classification of normal and abnormal.

2.2. The embodiment of the creature as "heterotopia"

Heterotopia is a concept proposed by Foucault, referring to those special Spaces that truly exist in the real world but are different from conventional Spaces. These Spaces usually have unique rules and functions, capable of reflecting, reversing or suspending the social relations of conventional Spaces. Foucault argues that heterotopia disrupt normative order through "heterogeneity", and the creature's non-human identity embodies this heterogeneity. (24) Foucault describes heterotopias as spaces that "juxtapose elements from different times and places." (25-26) The creature's body, a patchwork of fragmented human remains, forms a heterochronic body. Foucault defines heterotopias as protests of reality, and the creature is exiled to wilderness and icy wastelands, reflecting society's rejection of heterogeneous existence. The spatial segregation mirrors mainstream society's fear and control of the "Other." In "Phänomenologie des Geistes", Hegel points out that "the other" is a necessary condition for the formation of self-awareness: the master confirms his own authority through the submission of the slave, while the slave becomes an "instrumental existence" without essence. (Hegel 115) This kind of relationship is essentially conflicting and unbalanced, in which the other merely exists as a reference for the subject to establish authority.

3. The Creature's Attempts to Seek Identity

3.1. The creature as a "tourist"

In *Frankenstein*, the creature is created and has been on the fringes of human society since its birth. The movement, observation and imitation of language and behavior by monsters in human society embody the characteristic of "tourist gaze". The creature is considered as a "cultural tourist". He observes human culture and attempts to construct identity. Urry points out that gaze is an empowered visual practice, and tourists confirm themselves by observing "foreign lands" (Urry and Larsen 1). This kind of observation is not merely passive reception of information, but rather an active and selective one. Through the observation, tourists can confirm their own identities, values and cultural backgrounds. The creature happens to discover a peasant family in the forest and begins to secretly observe the daily life of this family. He lurks outside the De Lacey family's cottage for months, learning the language, emotions, and norms of human society through "eavesdropping" and "peering". This process mirrors the cultural tourist's gaze and imitation of foreign cultures. "I gradually comprehended their conversations... Words like 'love,' 'sorrow,' and 'family' filled me with confusion and longing" (Shelley 105). "I secretly gathered firewood to ease their burdens" (Shelley 107). These actions reveal the creature's attempt to integrate into human ethical systems through practice, aligning with Urry's assertion that "tourists seek cultural identity by participating in local activities" (Urry and Larsen 1).

However, the creature's gaze has always been in a contradiction between "subjective initiative" and "objectification". He actively learns language and ethics, but is violently expelled by the villagers because of his appearance, and is never able to integrate into human society. This marginalized state is similar to the passive isolation of tourists in a foreign land. He becomes what Foucault calls the "invisible one" (Foucault 164-65), that is, an existence forcibly marginalized by society. In the miniaturization of power, individuals may be unconsciously influenced by various invisible powers. The sources of these powers may be invisible, functioning without being detected. The failure of the creature to act as a "tourist" exposes society's rejection of "illegal mobility". This contradiction reflects the complexity of the "tourist gaze", that is, while tourists are actively learning, they also face the risk of being marginalized. In the 19th century, due to industrialization in Britain, population migration occurred and a large number of farmers went to work in cities. Factories and enterprises in cities have attracted a large number of rural people. Many farmers leave the countryside for cities in search of better job opportunities and living conditions. The mainstream society holds a worried and rejecting attitude towards these mobile groups. They believe that these floating populations may bring about social problems such as crime, poverty and moral corruption. In the novel, the creature, as a created life form, represents marginalized groups and outcasts in society. His existence arouses social fear and rejection, reflecting the concerns of society at that time about marginalized groups and the maintenance of social order. Victor intervenes in nature through scientific means and creates the creature, which reflects the concern of society at that time about the relationship between human beings and nature in the process of industrialization.

3.2. The fragility of cultural identity

The creature attempts to construct his identity through cultural mimicry, but falls into liminality due to social gaze: neither human nor natural, leading to complete alienation. Turner's liminality theory reveals that the fragility of cultural identity stems from the solidification of transitional states. Turner proposes three characteristics of thresholds: ambiguity, transition, and marginality (94-96,125). The creature breaks away from the natural order. First of all, his identity is ambiguous. The creature is neither completely human nor completely non-human. He has human appearance and intelligence, but is excluded by society

and unable to integrate into human society. Secondly, the creature is transitional. The creature undergoes a transition from hope to despair from being created to being excluded by society. Finally, the creature is marginal. He cannot integrate into any social group. The appearance of the creature disrupts the natural order, challenging the laws of nature and the normal operation of society, and triggers fear and conflict. Therefore, the creature, as a symbol of the threshold, reveals the fragility of cultural identity and social order.

In *Frankenstein*, the books *Paradise Lost* and Plutarch's *Lives* provide the creature with identity metaphors, yet deepen his existential crisis. "Am I like Satan, cast out for rebellion? Or Prometheus, punished for gifting fire to humanity?" (Shelley 124). Urry notes that tourists' understanding of foreign cultures often remains superficial (Urry and Larsen 46), and the creature's over-interpretation of literature exposes the fragility of his cultural identity. The fragility is first manifested in the threshold predicament of literary symbols. *Paradise Lost* provides a metaphor for the creature: Satan is a tragic hero who rebels against authority, while Adam is the rejected child of the creator, reinforcing the objectification trauma of the creature. Meanwhile, the threshold space where the creature is located is also compressed, from the wooden house as a place for cultural learning, to the wilderness as a place for exile, and finally to the ice field where life ends.

4. The Creature's Identity Deconstruction Under The Gaze of Power

4.1. Scientific gaze: Panopticism

Foucault's "panopticism" emphasizes modern society's use of spatial design to enforce omnipresent surveillance, compelling individuals to internalize discipline and self-restraint. In *Frankenstein*, Victor exerts a "God-like gaze" over the creature across both laboratory and societal spaces. He enacts indirect control by spying on the creature's actions and wields power through threats. This surveillance is not merely external, and it becomes internalized through the creature's fear, driving him to self-imposed exile. Victor Frankenstein's laboratory epitomizes Foucault's panoptic mechanism. The enclosed space, which is "a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house" (Shelley 37), functions as a disciplinary site where life is reduced to manipulable matter. His experiments involve electric and anatomical reassembly, enacting what Foucault calls "biopower". This "scientific gaze" objectifies the creature as a technological artifact, which is lifeless clay animated by galvanism. And it is also objectified as a docile body which is designed for control yet abandoned for defying aesthetic norms.

In Donna Haraway's Cyborg theory, she argues that "illegitimate fusions" of organic or technological destabilize human exceptionalism. The example of Victor's refusal to acknowledge biological personality reveals a fatal flaw of technological optimism: the neglect of the subjectivity of technological creation. Haraway argues that "illegitimate fusions of animal and machine" subvert "the structure and modes of reproduction of 'Western' identity, of nature and culture, of mirror and eye, slave and master, body and mind" (Haraway 176).

4.2. Self-gazing: From confrontation to nothingness

Foucault argues that "the most effective form of power is that which compels individuals to discipline themselves" (202). The creature's self-loathing epitomizes this internalization of power. The creature not only realizes that he is excluded by society, but also internalizes the negative evaluations of it from society. His self-destruction on the Arctic ice sheet serves both as a final rebellion against the violent gaze and as a symbol of the dissolution of his cultural identity. Yet his death is still documented by Robert Walton as a "scientific cautionary tale", suggesting the persistence of the gaze.

5. Conclusion

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* tells a tragic story of the creature's fate, presenting a critique of modern social gaze, power discipline, and identity construction. Informed by Michel Foucault's theory of the gaze and John Urry's tourist gaze, this paper examines the creature's identity crisis, its failed cultural assimilation, and the eventual dissolution of its subjectivity under multiple layers of gaze. It reveals how 19th-century scientific rationality and cultural hegemony systematically dismantle the marginalized subject's right to exist. Ultimately, the creature's tragedy mirrors a core dilemma of modernity: when rationalism treats the "Other" as an object of gaze rather than a subject of dialogue, and when technological progress rejects difference in the name of "normalization", society repeatedly produces "Frankenstein creatures" trapped in what can be called a "cage of gaze". Shelley's warning still resonates: only by breaking the cycle of gaze violence and building an inclusive politics of recognition can modern civilisation avoid collapsing into egocentrism and exclusion.

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