

Three Layers of Affects in Frankenstein

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Abstract: A variety of emotional forms are born out of physical modifications. As encounters differ, emotion always changes between pleasure and pain, and the variations of emotion are called “affect”. Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* is presented with multiple affects, mainly flowing among three layers: Victor Frankenstein, the creature and R. Walton, representative of readers. Their affects, being the change of “force of existing” and “the power of acting”, show the close relationship between emotion and body power. This paper examines the everlasting variations based on the affect theory to provide a new approach to understanding the characters’ seemingly unreasonable selects. In analysing these affects, we can therefore gain insight into their destinies and what is warned and reminded through Mary Shelley’s epoch-making work when science and reason were paramount.

Keywords: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Affect theory, Reader’s response

1. Introduction

Mary Shelley (1797–1851) lived in the age of the great triumph of science. The great victories of science are the most phenomenal event of that period when the industrial revolution was in full swing, natural science flourished and experimental science began to rise. Namely, the pursuit of knowledge pervaded. However, under the surface of it “there are all kinds of dark forces moving” [1]⁵⁵. Rationalism went so far that the blocked human sentiment sought egress in other directions. *Frankenstein* (1818) is merely one of the most profound representatives of this violent revolt in the literature field. Although the creature in the novel was born in the science laboratory because of the latest experimental science, his abundant, deep, and passionate emotions are highlighted as well as the “mad scientist” Victor Frankenstein’s. Their emotions cater to the notion of “affects” proposed in the “affect theory”.

In the early to mid-1990s, critical theorists and cultural critics invited a turn to affect. This notion can be traced back to Baruch de Spinoza, then it was developed by Gilles Deleuze Guattari and Brian Massumi into an important concept about the generation of subjectivity, thus forming the ontological path of “affect”. In *Ethics* Part III, Spinoza refers “affect” (affectus in Latin) to “the modifications (affectio) of the body”, or the process of physical interaction, “whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained, and also the ideas of such modifications” [2]². He also embodies the active and passive cases in “affect”– “Our mind is in certain cases active, and in certain cases passive. In so far as it has adequate ideas it is necessarily active, and in so far as it has inadequate ideas, it is necessarily passive”. Deleuze makes significant contributions to the genealogy of “affect” by mainly three means. Firstly, he made a clear distinction between “affect” and “affection”. The former refers to the increase or decrease of “the force of existing” of the body while the latter cannot exist independently. What Deleuze emphasizes more is the difference between the two states and the continuous change from one state to another. Secondly, he brings “intensity” to further define the capacity of affecting and being affected. Here, he defines human nature in terms of intensity, that is, the limit of one’s ability to bear affects of life. He also endows it with an inhuman dimension. Thirdly, “affect” has been incorporated into his theoretical system of “flowing-becoming”. Some of their beliefs of affects coincidentally shed light on the interpretations of the overflowing emotions in *Frankenstein*.

Although the powerful reverberations of the first science fiction last for hundreds, few studies on emotion analysis compared to the most on the ethics of science, life, morality, etc. For instance, Colleen Hobbs explored Victor’s repression and hysteria in 1993 from the perspectives of society, gender, and language, among which the gender factor has been further studied by Kate Newhook in 2017. Chen Shubo ascribed *Frankenstein*’s tragedy to his individualism passion. James C. Hatch traced how shame and disgust, as theorized by Silvan Tomkins, operated in the novel, and how these responses disrupt or undermined the function of sympathy in 2008 while Jeanne Britton also explored sympathy but in a

stylistic way. Recently, some critics started to focus on the “trans-legacy” or transgender affect of the creature such as Jolene Zigarovich and Anson Koch-Rein. And even if there are some, they are not drawn on the affect theory.

Hence, this paper aims to, with the help of some key points of the affect theory, analyze the continuous flowing of the “affects” among three layers throughout the story: Victor Frankenstein, the creature and R. Walton, the representation of readers. In so doing, more attention is paid to the insight into their destinies and Mary Shelley’s intentions to readers. We can, therefore, gain a relatively new approach to understanding the novel as well as a frame of reference for interpretation.

2. Frankenstein’s Affects: From Passion to Desperation

Frankenstein’s creation is marvelous and godlike, marking his peak of acting power if we observe it without any moral or ethical judgments. How can he make it? Why does he immediately change his mind once the creature comes to life? What is the relationship between his death and the creature?

The power of affect needs to be paid much more attention to. As Spinoza and Deleuze assert repeatedly, the power of the body is closely related to affect. By affect, Spinoza means “the modifications of the body, whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained, and also the ideas of such modifications” [2]², which is the interaction of the body and emotion. Deleuze further defines affect as the “continuous variation” [3]⁹⁴ of the force of existing or the power of acting. Human existence is emotional actions while affect is a human being’s living style (the force of existing). And affect is both physical (power of acting) and mental (power of thinking). In this sense, we can analyze Frankenstein’s success in the experiment based on his affects.

Frankenstein lives in a pleasant atmosphere before his departure for Ingolstadt. He feels “exquisite pleasure in dwelling on the recollections of childhood” [4]²⁹, which has laid a solid foundation for his pursuit of knowledge in the future. He gains power through the positive affects reflected by the family and his friend Henry. Much as his parents were attached, they “seemed to draw inexhaustible stores of affection from a very mine of love to bestow them upon” [4]²³ Frankenstein himself. His “mother’s tender caresses and father’s smile of benevolent pleasure” are his first recollections and he “received a lesson of patience, charity, and self-control”, guided by a silken cord. He “might have become sullen” in his ardor of nature, but Elizabeth was there to subdue him to a semblance of her gentleness because the “saintly soul of Elizabeth shone like a shrine-dedicated lamp in our peaceful home. Her sympathy was ours; her smile, her soft voice, and the sweet glance of her celestial eyes, were ever there to bless and animate us. She was the living spirit of love to soften and attract” [4]²⁹. Here, Elizabeth’s body becomes an endless source of positive affects to nurture Frankenstein. Furthermore, his father’s education impressed his mind “with no supernatural horrors”– “I do not ever remember to have trembled at a tale of superstition or to have feared the apparition of a spirit” [4]⁴², enabling him to shuttle back and forth in the graveyard, collecting organs.

Even if these “amiable companions” all disappear when Frankenstein goes to college and he feels down momentarily at first, his acting power is still getting stronger especially when he encounters Professor M. Waldman. “Encounter” is unremittingly emphasized in Deleuze’s Lecture Transcripts on Spinoza’s Concept of Affect where he iterates the mixing and interaction of objects and the pleasant or unpleasant affects variations that occur when bodies encounter. It is this encounter when Mr. Waldman delivers the speech about pursuing science that thoroughly affects Frankenstein, leading to the unpredictable experiment– “more, far more, will I achieve; treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation. My internal being was in a state of insurrection and turmoil; I felt that order would thence arise, but I had no power to produce it” [4]³⁸. From then on, he has been affected actively based on what Spinoza named the “adequate cause”. It refers to one can know things only on one’s own in which the mind is active, otherwise is a passive and partial cause [5]²⁰⁴. Joy can be felt in taking the initiative to force on something else (the body), thus one’s power increases. What is frequently used in this phase is the word “passion” and its synonymy “impulse/drive” [6]¹³⁰. Frankenstein makes full use of his active affects as an adequate cause, “gained strength as I proceeded and soon became so ardent and eager that the stars often disappeared in the light of morning whilst I was yet engaged in my laboratory” [4]⁴¹, and even reaches the state of “ecstasy”. The creature’s “gigantic stature” [4]⁴⁴ also indicates his self-aggrandizement. He turns to the structure of the human frame and eventually makes it, marking the peak of his “power of acting”.

It has never occurred to him, though, he can be negatively affected by the creature he created. In fact,

once it was created, its body always detrimentally haunts Frankenstein until the end. Not until the creature has come to life that Frankenstein realized how ugly and unnatural he was. Because there is a huge difference between a corpse and a living body while the latter means he becomes an active, twisted, unnatural subject that can affect Frankenstein in an unforeseen way. Now, Frankenstein is in a passive state contrary to the active one before. Such negative affects as disgust, fear, and anxiety will impair one's ability to act as well as make the individual in a toxic relationship that is incompatible with oneself [7]¹²⁰. In this relation, one cannot reach the knowledge of the "common notions". That is a significant reason why Frankenstein keeps escaping from the creature, a representative of his state of servitude, marking the lowest state of his power of acting– "I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe...the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" [4]⁴⁹. Unable to endure the aspect of the being he has created, Frankenstein rushes out of the room, but he never really rushes out of his destiny.

Despite his power regaining from his family and friends temporarily–his health is always better accompanied by Henry, Elizabeth, or his father as they bring joy, peace and delight, Frankenstein's body is gradually consumed after five "encounters" with the creature. Each time they encounter Frankenstein is suffered negative affects: "A sense of mortal agony crept over my frame" [4]⁷²; "a weight of despair and remorse pressed on my heart which nothing could remove" [4]⁸⁵; "rage and hatred had at first deprived me of utterance...furious detestation and contempt" [4]⁹⁴, etc. In other words, his nervous fever has never recovered indeed since the first time. Besides, his power sources vanish one by one (William, Henry, Elizabeth, and the father) murdered directly or indirectly by the creature. Hence, his strength diminished until nothing was left but a desperate feeling of revenge. "Emotion is always a process of affecting and being affected or bearing and being borne, but everyone has an emotional limit" [7]¹¹⁹. He who crosses over it has already reached the maximum "intensity" to bear affection, thus coming to a termination.

3. The Creature's Affects: From Desire to Desperation

The creature, to some extent, is a "noble savage" at first. In its first incarnation, the noble savage was a shorthand term for the idealized European vision of the inhabitants of the New World. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas More, and others idealized the naked "savages" as innocent of sin. They noted that among the Indians "the seeds of all evils, do not exist for those people...in open gardens, without laws or books, without judges, and they naturally follow goodness" [8]⁴⁶.

To begin with, it seems that the creature is born to feel and to be affected with a natural following of goodness as his instinct rather than a "tabula rasa". "It was dark when I awoke; I felt cold also, and half-frightened, as it were, instinctively, finding myself so desolate"; "on a sensation of cold, I had covered myself with some clothes...I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch...but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept" [4]⁹⁹; "I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity" [4]⁹⁵; "My senses were gratified and refreshed by a thousand scents of delight and a thousand sights of beauty" [4]¹¹³. And he can be positively affected by the nature such as the moon and fire– "the only object that I could distinguish was the bright moon, and I fixed my eyes on that with pleasure"; "I found a fire which had been left by some wandering beggars and was overcome with delight at the warmth I experienced from it" [4]¹⁰¹. Besides, he is intuitively opposed to evil, which can be told from his reaction to Felix's class– "For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow...but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased and I turned away with disgust and loathing" [4]¹¹⁶. So how come this "noble savage" eventually becomes a heinous murderer? How come he chooses to commit suicide burning to death? The answers need to be excavated from his affects that happened during several most crucial "encounters".

The most significant encounter could be with the De Lacey family where he is "deeply affected" [4]¹⁰⁸. It happens the moment he sees them playing an instrument.

"It was a lovely sight, even to me, poor wretch who had never beheld aught beautiful before. The silver hair and benevolent countenance of the aged cottager won my reverence, while the gentle manners of the girl enticed my love...He raised her and smiled with such kindness and affection that I felt sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature; they were a mixture of pain and pleasure, such as I had never before experienced, either from hunger or cold, warmth or food; and I withdrew from the window, unable to bear these emotions" [4]¹⁰⁴⁻¹⁰⁵.

Their love also resonates in the creature's mind. It is at this particular moment that the creature begins

to desire more. He desires for joining them, which means becoming a real human being and being cared for and loved mainly. "Desire arising through pain or pleasure, hatred or love, is greater in proportion as the emotion is greater" [2]¹⁵. The more he observes the family, the more he loves their kindness, thus the desire stronger. He also becomes active physically as the affect theory indicates due to an "adequate cause". He assists their laborers in collecting wood for the family fire, learns the language and takes the lessons furtively. His physical actions become powerful as he gains more active affects and vice versa. He "cannot describe the delight" he feels and "when they were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys" [4]¹⁰⁹. He attaches his affects with them tightly, "which rather increased than satisfied the desire" he "had of becoming one among his fellows" [4]¹¹⁷.

Thus, there is no wonder he abruptly turns to the contrary affects after the one-sided encounter ends. Agatha fainted, Safie rushed out of the cottage and Felix struck him violently with a stick. The creature's half-painful self-deceit is exposed. His "desire to become an actor in the busy scene where so many admirable qualities were called forth and displayed" [4]¹²⁵ is frustrated. He is negatively affected- "who can describe their horror and consternation on beholding me"; his heart sank "with bitter sickness" and "overcome by pain and anguish" so his body refrained, "quitted the cottage, and in the general tumult escaped unperceived to my hovel" [4]¹³²⁻¹³³.

However, it is not until he was shot by a man after the creature had rescued a girl that he becomes extremely passive- "Inflamed by pain, I vowed eternal hatred and vengeance to all mankind" [4]¹⁴⁰. Being affected passively means suffering and weakening the power of existing. Once in this state, the body is powerless and uncertain. Then the creature's actions become uncertain and frenzied, with strangling William as a symbol. Here, we can still feel his desire for a companion for he craves the innocent child's being his fellow but in vain. Furthermore, the creature's hope has been completely destructed when he sees Frankenstein tearing the unfinished female creature. He shouted: "I have endured toil and misery...do you dare destroy my hopes" [4]¹⁶⁹ then continues his even crazier revenge. "Revenge is the desire whereby we are induced, through mutual hatred, to injure one who, with similar feelings, has injured us" [2]³⁰. Because the creature's hope, "an inconstant pleasure", has been replaced with painful despair arising from fear of loneliness, there is left nothing but this kind of desire for revenge till Frankenstein's death.

Why does the creature unhesitatingly choose to commit suicide once Frankenstein died? When it comes to this, we cannot forget the "maximum intensity" in the affect theory talked about above. Frankenstein, as the last person who can affect the creature thus giving him the power of existing and acting, is the only source to maintain the creature's will to live. Once he died, nothing was left to the creature but those overwhelming negative affects- "my agony was still superior to thine, for the bitter sting of remorse will not cease to rankle in my wounds until death shall close them forever...Polluted by crimes and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death?" [4]²²⁵⁻²²⁶. Hence, he chooses to be burnt in the light of that conflagration which gave him some positive affects during his early life after endured so much. Now it is his "only consolation". His power of existing diminishes as a result of the deepest desperation, fading away as his ashes are swept into the sea by the winds.

4. Walton's Affects: Shelley's Expectations on Readers

We, as readers, have been told the whole story together with Walton all the time from the outermost narrative, thus becoming Margaret, one of his sisters. Once Frankenstein and the monster are narrated as "I" respectively, the "I" of Walton, the recorder of the story, immediately melts into both "I"s that tell us their unusual experiences and intense painful feelings with an unquestionable "immediacy" [9]⁷¹. As a result, our affects resonate with Walton's, through which Mary Shelley's intentions and expectations are conveyed to the targeted readers.

Readers and Walton are always touched by an everlasting affect variation between the two narrators. On the one hand, Frankenstein, on behalf of the "mad scientist", directly affected us continuously till the end-

"Sometimes, seized with sudden agony, he could not continue his tale; at others, his voice broken, yet piercing, uttered with difficulty the words so replete with anguish. His fine and lovely eyes were now lighted up with indignation, now subdued to downcast sorrow and quenched in infinite wretchedness. Sometimes he commanded his countenance and tones and related the most horrible incidents with a tranquil voice, suppressing every mark of agitation; then, like a volcano bursting forth, his face would suddenly change to an expression of the wildest rage as he shrieked out imprecations on his persecutor" [4]²¹²⁻²¹³.

What has been warned is firstly conveyed through affecting as Walton writes– “you have read this strange and terrific story, Margaret; and do you not feel your blood congeal with horror, like that which even now curdles mine?” [4]²¹². Walton’s pursuit of the mysteries of the Arctic resembles Frankenstein’s to a large extent, possibly leading to another tragedy, but as the horror and fear affected by Frankenstein, Walton can be influenced to stop. Walton is still reluctant to retreat and come back home even if he has been affected and begun to vacillate. It is Frankenstein’s last words that convince him. “Would you also create for yourself and the world a demoniacal enemy? Peace, peace! Learn my miseries and do not seek to increase your own” [4]²¹³; “I will not lead you on, unguarded and ardent as I then was, to your destruction and infallible misery”. He iterates the lesson: “Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge...” [4]⁴⁴. As a result, Walton’s course reversal indicates Shelley’s critical opinion on “scientific rationality” [10]⁹⁴, for it would bring arrogance and self-conceit to the extreme.

On the other, Walton not only records the creature’s narration but witnesses him at the end of the story, which is a further complementary affection to Frankenstein’s one-sided narration. Walton is firstly moved by the creature’s sincere words regardless of Frankenstein’s one side of the story full of slander, showing the importance of true “encounter”. “...my first impulses, which had suggested to me the duty of obeying the dying request of my friend in destroying his enemy, were now suspended by a mixture of curiosity and compassion” [4]²²²; “I was at first touched by the expressions of his misery” [4]²²³. One cannot help thinking of the contradiction between their arguments, especially the creature’s suicide being pathetic evidence of his words. Shelley here tries to arouse readers’ sympathy as well as to remind every reader of the miserable destiny of the creature, thus making us ponder and reflect on the power of science and technology. Should our pursuit of science expand without any restraint? How can we deal with such a monster once it was born? Is there any possibility of symbiosis? These questions haunt us human beings today. Emotional acceptance may be the first step. We might catch the possibility from Walton’s flashing affects. In this way, his affects may become the targeted readers’.

Much of the successful revolution in literature has been the transformation of what was once an abomination into something intoxicating, or vice versa, thus profoundly changing people’s values [11]¹⁶⁴. Mary Shelley successfully initiated this revolution through the first science fiction. The creature, once abandoned, despised, and hated by his creator and other characters in the novel, is now become one most of readers sympathize with.

5. Conclusions

Through the analyses above, this paper finds a coincidence between Shelley’s and Deleuze’s views on the continuous variations of affects. “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body” [3]²⁵⁷. Shelley asserts this through Frankenstein’s discourse: “How mutable are our feelings, and how strange is that clinging love we have of life even in the excess of misery!” [4]¹⁷⁴. The success of the novel can be ascribed to these plentiful affects flowing among different characters to a large extent.

Thus, this paper analyzes these affects in it by three layers. Frankenstein’s affects are from passion to desperation while the creature’s are from desire to desperation. Both their power of existing and acting vary as the affects due to different “encounters”. Readers experience every affect with Walton through which Mary Shelley has successfully initiated a kind of sympathy to the creature as well as the critical reflection towards the flourishing science and technology.

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