

# The Pursuit for Identity and Community of Monster in *Frankenstein*

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**Abstract:** *Frankenstein* is a long Gothic novel written by British writer Mary Shelley in 1818. This work tells a series of tragic stories about Frankenstein, a biologist who is passionate about the origin of life, pieced together various parts of different corpses into a huge monster, and a series of tragic stories in which he abandoned the monster and made enemies with him. This work is considered to be the world's first real science fiction novel with a strong romanticism. From a monster-centered perspective, this article analyzes his pursuit of identity and community with humans during his life as not accepted by human society. From constantly making efforts to integrate into human society, to committing a series of crimes on the opposite side of mankind, then choosing self-destruction, the tragic life of the scientific monster embodies the helplessness of being deprived of the living space of an innate outsider.

**Keywords:** *Frankenstein; identity; community*

## 1. Introduction

Mary Shelley (1797—1851) is an irreplaceable figure in English Romantic literature in the early nineteenth century. She wrote *Frankenstein* at only 18 years old and was known as “the mother of science fiction”. This novel could be hailed as the world’s first science fiction novel in its real sense, and at the same time became a model of female Gothic novels with a strong romantic color. *Frankenstein* is a novel that is deeply interested in a particular kind of social union, namely, the community. Written in 1818 and at the moment between revolution and reform, Shelley’s novel invokes contemporary discussions and theorizations of the human community.

The protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, created an extremely powerful but ugly monster in the laboratory. Out of fear and disgust for the monster, he left the poor creature alone. After being maltreated by humans, the creature launched a frantic revenge on his creator. In the end, Frankenstein died while chasing the monster he created, and the monster desperately ended his painful life.

This article analyzes the monster’s pursuit of identity and community in *Frankenstein*. It is mainly divided into two chapters except for the introduction and the conclusion. Based on the studies of the text, the first chapter analyzes the monster’s pursuit of its own identity since its life was given, and divided it into the formation and acceptance process of identity. For further discussion, the formation process of its identity can be subdivided into several factors in terms of its name, language acquisition, thoughts, and behaviors. The second chapter explores the monster’s eternal identity as “the other” and the deep-seated reason why it is not accepted by the communities through the analysis of the monster’s behavior of pursuing the community with his protector and creator in *Frankenstein*.

## 2. The Monster’s Pursuit of Identity

Whether a monster can be classified as a human being, people hold different opinions. At least, its creator Frankenstein does not recognize it as a human. However, by observing human beings and learning human languages, the creature has mastered human survival skills, accepted human worldview, and possessed human emotions and aesthetic appeal.

The tragedy in *Frankenstein* is that the creature is approaching human society, but humans gave him a “monster” status and sentenced him to death for this crime. The creature wants to integrate into human society and gain a human identity, but his various efforts have failed in the face of human prejudice. For such reason, the creature accepted the identity as a “monster” which was imposed on him by humans and faithfully played an evil role according to the concept of humans.

## **2.1 The Formation of Identity**

According to Oxford Dictionary, one of the basic meanings of the word “identity” is “who or what somebody/something is” and another is “the state or feeling of being very similar to and able to understand somebody/something”, which is similar to a common sense of specific character. It includes not only some objective similar or identical characteristics, such as the same identity, the same performance, etc. but also the consistency of psychological understanding and the relationship formed thereby. Within the scope of psychology, “identity” and “self” are closely related and usually refer to the self-consciousness of individuals in social life that are connected with some people and distinguished from others. The process of identity recognition is composed of three aspects: the individual’s own demands through words or actions, his own identity of himself, and the recognition of others in the community.

### **2.1.1 Name**

Naming is the prerequisite for social existence and one of the sources of identity. Name introduces us to a group of beings, a community, and makes us realize that we must occupy a position or play a role in a system that contains ourselves. With a name, one also has an identity and has its own place in the universe.

Before the monster came alive, Victor Frankenstein, the creator, called it “the being”. When the monster gained life, he began to call it “monster”. In fact, any existence can be called a being, and anything created by God can be called a creature. Yet “monsters” cannot be named or classified, which means the creature gained no name from his creator. By naming his creation “monster”, he added a category of attributes and characteristics to the creature. When the monster was born, he was ignorant of good and evil. But he has been marked as “evil” and classified as “inhuman” by his creator because of his deformed appearance. He has been excluded from human society since his birth, so even the creature himself calls his birth a “cursed birth”, which implied the tragedy that he was destined to not be accepted by human society in the future<sup>[1]</sup>. And the monster, like his imaginary category, is not recognized to exist. With no name and no natural existence category, the creature cannot enter a system and get his position. The existence of the monster was not seen or accepted in that human society.

But after Shelley’s novel was published, many people lent the name of the creator to his creation, thus giving the monster the name “Frankenstein”. Although Victor Frankenstein refused to recognize this “son”, the creature’s existence was recognized by later generations<sup>[2]</sup>. It is worth noting that “Frankenstein” has two interpretations in modern English: one is a self-destructive person, and the other is a thing that destroys its own creator. In this way, we can find the contradiction of this book through its name—the scientist Victor Frankenstein and the creature he created, nameless but inherited his surname, are both “Frankenstein”.

### **2.1.2 Language and Thoughts**

The monster’s language acquisition process and inner spiritual development are also factors in his identity formation. When Mary Shelley created this character, she depicted the newborn monster as a pure and flawless creature with a blank mind. He lived in the forest merely on instinct and would never attack a human. Because of ignorance, the warmth of the sun, the brightness of the moon, and the singing of the birds made him feel happy and satisfied. When winter came, the monster had to leave the forest, wander for a few days, and then arrived in a village.

The monster’s first contact with a human was a tragic failure. “I had hardly placed my foot within the door before the children shrieked, and one of the women fainted. The whole village was roused; some fled, some attacked me...<sup>[4]</sup>” At this time, the monster did not have any good feelings for humans and was unwilling to establish any contact with them. But separated by a wall from his shack is the exiled French aristocracy, the De Lacey family. Fortunately or not, this family has established contact with the monster. They changed the monster’s perception of humans and carved an indelible mark on his pure soul.

The monster learns human language by observing the De Laceys, and through language learning, it accepted human ethics, masters historical and cultural knowledge, and had the desire to enter human society. To learn a language is to learn the culture represented by that language. The monster studied language diligently and was eager to use language to communicate with humans and be accepted by their community. But while mastering the human language, he was also assimilated by human culture and accepted the human point of view that he is an ugly monster, an inhuman existence<sup>[2]</sup>.

It is also worth mentioning that the monster understood human society and his situation by reading Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, and Goethe's *The Troubles of Young Werther*. They can be considered as the correspondence of religion, society, and nature, and also the correspondence of spirit, others, and self, which helped the monster to build a relatively complete worldview and self-awareness. He always connects with its own feelings and situations, "I found myself similar yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings...I was unformed in mind; I was dependent on none and related to none. <sup>[4]</sup>" Sometimes, he began to doubt his existence, "My person was hideous and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? <sup>[4]</sup>" These books made him realize his identity as "the other" to humans and strengthened his desire to make his existence meaningful.

From these plots, we can conclude that human culture and language are foreign and external to the monster. The monster hoped that language can make him accepted by human society, but language itself excluded him. Generally speaking, it is hard to decide which group is "the other" since they are two opposites. But the monster considered himself as heterogeneous because he looked at himself from the perspective of the other, and thus became the other. The increase in knowledge only makes it more aware that he is an alien and deserves to be abandoned.

From the perspective of thoughts, it can be found that the monster's aesthetic judgment has been distorted by human aesthetics. When the monster lived alone in the forest, he had seen his appearance in the stream but didn't think it was weird or ugly. After he met Agatha, Felix, Safie, and De Lacey, slowly he began to think that they were beautiful and charming, elegant and delicate, kind and amiable. At that time, he measured himself with human aesthetic standards and made his own deformed, weird, and ugly judgments. Actually, when the monster left Frankenstein's laboratory, he found Frankenstein's diary in the pocket of his clothes. Through that diary, the monster knew Frankenstein had breathless horror and disgust filled his heart when he saw his creation. After reading it, the monster was also infected with the panic-stricken feeling. If he did not accept human aesthetic concepts, he would not consider himself ugly, nor would he produce negative feelings such as inferiority, depression, and shame. These feelings enabled the monster to understand the aversion and hatred of humans to him and nobody would accept and love him. It can be said that the given appearance is a source of his pain.

Another aspect of the monster's thoughts is reflected in his thinking about kinship. From this aspect, his peculiar birth of him is another source of his pain in identity. He was made without parents, relatives, and friends. The first few words the monster learned from De Lacey are the names of family members and their names. These words shifted the focus of the monster's thinking from the body to the identity. The monster examined himself according to the model of De Lacey family and found that he did not have any form of social relationship. He aspired to have family and friends like normal people. Such thoughts proved that the monster has fully identified with the human lifestyle and hoped to live like a human. He recognized and desired to have the identity of a "person". In his view then, only by becoming a "person" can survival be meaningful and valued. Since it was impossible for him to have a family blood relationship, then he had to establish his own interpersonal relationship.

The thought of establishing a relationship with others completely controlled the monster, so he immediately acted and began to work hard to establish a relationship with the De Laceys. He hoped that this family, his "protectors", will accept him as a normal person. The monster knew that people were afraid of him mainly because of his ugly appearance, so he pinned his hopes on the blind old De Lacey. He found an opportunity for the old man to be at home alone and began to implement his plan—to impress the elderly through words, win his favor, and finally be accepted by their family and become their friends. At first, the old man was moved by the monster's words. He said, "I am blind and cannot judge of your countenance, but there is something in your words which persuades me that you are sincere. <sup>[4]</sup>" But just when the old man's sympathy was about to make the monster enter the social chain for the first time, Felix and Agatha came back and drove the monster out. We could find that although the monster is eloquent, he cannot change the prejudice of human beings against weird things, and even himself has such prejudice, which pushes him to the side of "the other".

### **2.1.3 External Behavior**

For the external behavior, the monster's noble moral character and good deeds did not solve the problem that he is not accepted by human society. Through long-term observation and learning, he had a deeper understanding of human society and a systematic understanding of the concepts of good and evil. He admires virtue, hates evil, and carries out his own practice under the guidance of this kind of thinking.

In extreme pain of being abandoned by his protectors, he embarked on a journey to seek help from

his creator. If his kindness to the protectors is unpersuasive because they can be regarded as his enlightenment mentors, then saving the unfamiliar drowning girl on his way to find his creator is a more powerful expression of his good deeds. Saving people's lives can be regarded as the greatest good deed under normal circumstances, but instead of receiving the gratitude of the girl's relatives, he was shot by her father, shattering the warmth and kindness he had just regained and deepening his hatred for mankind<sup>[3]</sup>.

This kind of unfair treatment of grievances for virtue caused the monster to hate all human beings. He hates Frankenstein in particular because the unfair treatment he received was all because of his weird birth and ugly appearance. The monster has already understood that it is impossible to get care and compassion from humans, but he has not completely given up on it<sup>[3]</sup>. When it met Frankenstein's young brother William, it began to fantasize about making friends with William. "this little creature was unprejudiced and had lived too short a time to have imbibed a horror of deformity. If, therefore, I could seize him and educate him as my companion and friend. <sup>[4]</sup>" But his mistakes soon revealed that he called William "child" while William called him "monster" "ugly wretch" and "orge" <sup>[4]</sup>. However, the main reason that prompted the monster to kill William was not despair, but William's identity. He was a member of Frankenstein's family, and belonged to "my enemy—to him towards whom I have sworn eternal revenge; you shall be my first victim. <sup>[4]</sup>" Here we could clearly find the monster had gradually accepted his identity as a humans' opponent.

The monster's hatred of Justine seems to be unreasonable. But according to the logic of desire, frustrated erotic impulses tend to turn to death impulses. The monster longed for but couldn't get the love of a woman. So he vented his frustrated feelings on the first woman he met, making Justine a victim of his twisted lust. This kind of unprovoked hatred pushed the monster to the further opposite identity of humans.

## ***2.2 The Acceptance of Identity***

The root of the identity of the monster is a moral and ethical issue related to human society, which is also the key to the monster's acceptance of his own identity. The monster is not only a devout apprentice and conscious participant of human culture, but also an alien that human culture strongly rejects<sup>[1]</sup>. His existence raises the question of what is the difference and boundary between "human" and "non-human". The monster's body is non-human, but he shares human language, thoughts, and feelings. His mind and heart are also human, which makes him a mixture of "human" and "non-human". His existence of him blurs the boundary between the two sides.

In the process of people constructing the subject's identity, one can only find his own relationship attributes with the help of some external relationships, such as his relatives. That is because the initial self-awareness of human beings is obtained from their relationship with others. If a person has this sense of loneliness, it will be difficult to obtain the true experience of being a self. Therefore, the monster was very afraid of being alone, tried to make friends with humans, and even required his own wife, a fixed social circle of his own. In other words, with the love of a female monster, they could enter the cycle of life. But this expectation was repeatedly shattered by the hostility of humans towards him, especially when Frankenstein tore up the female monster he had almost created. Hence, the monster was forced to stay in eternal loneliness and could not get a proper identity.

This can explain why the monster used his crimes to draw a line between humans, and he began to judge its relationship with humans from his own standpoint. His name for Frankenstein subsequently became "human", which implies he gained a self-consciousness in the confrontation with human beings. He no longer sought to integrate into an external, alien-human world. A similar female monster means a similar identity, which enables him to build his world outside of humans.

Furthermore, the monster recognizes his existence as a single category in confrontation with a human after being maltreated. The monster understands that all hostile actions from humans are not crimes in the human world, but are justified behavior to safeguard the interest of mankind. He once asked Frankenstein:

You would not call it murder if you could precipitate me into one of those ice-rifts and destroy my frame, the work of your own hands. Shall I respect man when he condemns me? Let him live with me in the interchange of kindness, and instead of injury I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude at his acceptance. But that cannot be; the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union. Yet mine shall not be the submission of abject slavery. <sup>[4]</sup>

These words show the self-consciousness and self-esteem of the monster. He has confirmed his identity as “the other” in human society and has decided neither to obey the laws of mankind nor become a slave to mankind. The dream of establishing a sense of identity with a human has been shattered, so the monster has turned to seek to stay away from humans and desires to establish his own life circle and pursue his own happiness.

In a word, there are many similarities between monsters and human beings. He understands the world from a human perspective, acquires human consciousness, emotions, and behaviors, and has a yearning for human identity. Yet because of his ugly appearance and weird way of birth, it is difficult for him to truly own human identity and enter human society. This brings a great crisis to his pursuit of identity, and eventually led him to the opposite of humanity and even to self-destruction. Such monster identity also led to the disillusionment of his desire to establish a community with mankind, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

### **3. The Monster’s Pursuit for Community**

The tragedy of the monster lies in the difference between him and human beings and their dis-identification. The monster is always in the identity of the other, which is a concept of an object. In self-consciousness, humans judge monsters with themselves as the main position and regard monsters as their subordinate object, which makes the monster’s effort on establishing a community with human beings in vain.

#### ***3.1 Pursuing the Community with His Protector***

Everyone in the world hopes to be integrated into an environment and a society. In this society, some people can love and be loved and have a place of their own. Being respected and loved by others is the way to gain the meaning of life, which also means a kind of community. Human beings have longed for establishing such communities throughout their lives, and so does the monster.

In the monster’s life, except for his creator, the second most important figure was his neighbor’s family. These people were the closest to him and had an important influence on his recognition and acceptance in the process of establishing an individual’s subject identity. This led to the De Lacey’s becoming the monster’s first goal to establish a community.

The problem that the novel raises here, as discussed in the previous chapter, is the opposition between vision and language—an ugly body and a touching language. According to vision, people think that monsters are evil and should be avoided. Yet according to language, old De Lacey thinks the monster is sincere and kind. The monster is the most eloquent character in this novel. He speaks and infers with a high degree of elegance, logic, and persuasiveness. Because of his definite appearance, he can only place his hope on the power of language and hope to establish relationships with others through language.

However, the power of language is ultimately inferior to the prejudices about appearance. After being rejected by the De Lacey’s, the monster was overwhelmed with sorrow. The pain caused him to reflect on his unique birth and the disasters that it brought. As a thinking and emotional creature, his life must be based on the existence of others as a prerequisite and condition. So the monster must form a group relationship with others, that is, a sense of community. In order to develop his own social relationship, the monster came out of the village and looked for his creator.

#### ***3.2 Pursuing the Community with His Creator***

A monster must have a person or another monster who recognizes his existence and shares a community with him, in order to “feel the affections of a sensitive being and became linked to the chain of existence and events.”<sup>[4]</sup> He decided to find his creator, Victor Frankenstein, because “Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed.” “You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow creatures, who owe me nothing?”<sup>[4]</sup> He hoped to get fair treatment from Frankenstein and entered human society through the father-son relationship between them.

At first, Frankenstein, who always insists on his categorical moral distance from his creation, fully resisted accepting the creature. Victor responds to the Creature’s civil first attempts to communicate with him by saying, “Begone! I will not hear you. There can be no community between you and me; we

are enemies. Begone, or let us try our strength in a fight, in which one must fall. [4]” But the monster convinced Frankenstein to listen to his story and established the relationship between them as the narrator and the receiver, which is still a relationship established through language. While telling the story, the monster provided Victor with the role of his father through his words, making him admit that “I felt that there was some justice in his argument. His tale and the feelings he now expressed proved him to be a creature of fine sensations... [4]” Although Frankenstein felt sick and disgusted when he saw the monster’s dirty and ugly appearance, he started to sympathize with him.

The monster exerted influence on Frankenstein through conversation and established a contractual relationship with Frankenstein. At the same time, the monster subtly assimilated Frankenstein, dehumanized him, and made him enter a similar kind of survival dilemma. The most excruciating pain of the monster was having to be in isolation from others. So Frankenstein was forced to fall into parallel loneliness after agreeing to create a female monster. It seemed that he has no right to ask for the sympathy of his family and reunite with his family anymore. After Frankenstein signed the contract, he exclaimed, “Oh! Stars and clouds and winds, ye are all about to mock me; if ye really pity me, crush sensation and memory; let me become as nought...leave me in darkness. [4]” This is also the result of Frankenstein sharing the secret, the sin, and part of the identity with the creature he created. In some way, a kind of abandoned community was established between them. As Mary Shelley’s novel unfolds, Victor is proved to be both right and wrong in his conjectures about community with the creature. He is right in believing that so long as monsters and men are sworn “enemies” and hold nothing in common, they cannot possibly inhabit a shared social union. But Victor is wrong to think that coming up with things to hold in common is an insurmountable task. He hears the monster’s story, and upon its completion creature and creator enter into a compact that obliges Victor to assemble a female monster. On the basis of the compact they forge, monster and man are able to re-imagine the nature of their affiliation with each other. Their agreement renders them no longer “enemies” but individuals who commit themselves to each other for the foreseeable future. In this crucial scene on Montanvert, Shelley’s protagonists build their community through a process of agreement-making.

To sum up, in *Frankenstein* Shelley engages with these debates by depicting characters who endeavor, like the monster, to attach themselves to others. Victor’s declaration on Montanvert that “there can be no community” among “enemies” voices Shelley’s belief that enmity and alienation are untenable conditions of being for people. It also draws attention to the novel’s preoccupation with building new communities on new terms. From Walton to Victor, Felix, Safie, and the monster, Shelley’s characters lament their singularity and long for companionship. Thus the principal task the novel sets for its characters is the project of community building, that is, of specifying the basis and boundaries of shared life.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the pursuit of the identity and community of the monster in *Frankenstein*. Through the plot analysis, it can be found that the distinctness of the monster’s existence is determined by his birth. His body was artificially made of natural ingredients, which made him both natural and artificial. At the same time, it can also be concluded that the creature neither belongs to the realm of nature, nor is within the scope of artificiality. The creature is the product of the extreme curiosity of Victor Frankenstein. He cannot enter human society or find his place in nature, and that leads to his failure in the pursuit of human identity. Without a human identity, he could not establish any common community with other human beings but build a semi-human community with his creator. Furthermore, humans impose their imagination on this creature and force him to become an evil “monster”. That is the fundamental reason why the monster could only become the opponent to human beings and seek self-destruction.

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