

The Monster's Tragic Self-actualization in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*

Siwen Meng

School of Foreign Languages of Shanghai University, Shanghai, 200444, China

Abstract: *Mary Shelley's representative work Frankenstein is the first of modern science fiction in western literature. Frankenstein, the protagonist of the novel, abuses science and creates a manlike monster. The monster cannot engage himself in the human society and eventually goes to ruin. In light of American social psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchical theory of needs, this paper analyzes the five levels of needs that the monster is confronted with as he steps into human society. After mastering the basic survival skills to satisfy his physiological need and safety need, which can be categorized as deficit needs, the monster tries to meet belongingness and love need by observing human's daily life, mastering human language, and establishing emotional connection with human beings. However, human's indifference and abandonment deprives him of esteem and recognition, which leads to his devastating revenge against his creator-Frankenstein. This paper points out that the monster's self-actualization without love and esteem is the root of his tragedy.*

Keywords: *Frankenstein, Mary Shelley, monster, Abraham H. Maslow*

1. Introduction

Frankenstein is the representative work of British writer Mary Shelley, which stands for the peak of Gothic novel as the first modern science fiction. Since *Frankenstein* was published, it has drawn wide attention in academic circles. In recent years, new achievements in the study of this novel continue to emerge. The perspective of interpretation is no longer limited to the previous "human's abuse of science", but to explore the aesthetic value of *Frankenstein* more comprehensively and deeply, for example, from the perspective of Freud's psychoanalysis, feminism and other theoretical perspectives.

Victor Frankenstein, the protagonist of *Frankenstein*, is a young scientist who is very interested in the origin of life. He wants to create a perfect new human, but instead what he creates is a tall and ferocious monster. Escaping from his creator, the monster tries hard to find himself a position in the human society, but in vain. Deserted by the De Lacey family and even the whole society, the monster plans to take revenge on Frankenstein, his creator. It is clear that the monster is not born evil. What makes him embark on the road of revenge and end up in tragedy with his creator? The abuse of science by human being is indeed an essential external reason. However, to explore the so-called "evil" nature of the monster himself is to look into the important internal factors that cause his tragic fate, which can be illustrated by Abraham Maslow's hierarchical theory of needs, a classic theoretical basis put forward first in 1943.

An important premise of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory to analyze the individual is that the individual should be a healthy and complete person. Whether the monster in *Frankenstein* is human or not, his creator, Victor Frankenstein, denies from the beginning to the end, calling him "demon" or "devil". However, judging from an objective point of view, the fundamental difference between animal and human is labor and language. Through learning and observation, the monster masters basic survival skills in human society and acquires human language and the way of communication. Moreover, he also develops human feelings and aesthetic taste. Therefore, although the monster is a creature of human, he also belongs to human beings. The only reason for his being called "monster" is that he looks "extremely ugly". Since he has most of the human nature, he is endowed with all human needs. ^[1]

The original intention of need is "organism's dependence on the indispensable conditions for its existence, continuation and development" ^[2]. Initially, Abraham Maslow's hierarchical theory of needs divides people's basic needs into five different levels: physiological need, safety need, belongingness and love need, esteem need and self-actualization need, which can be categorized into deficit need and growth need. The needs that directly relates to individual's sustenance and survival is called deficit or deficiency

need. Only with the satisfaction of deficit needs can one pursue growth needs. In general, after relatively meeting a certain level of need, a higher level need will take the place of the former as the driving force of one's behavior^[3].

2. The Monster's Tragic Self-actualization in Frankenstein

2.1. Satisfaction of Deficit Need: the First Step into Human Society

Physiological need is closely related to individual survival, mainly including hunger, thirst, clothing and housing. In the pyramid structure of needs, physiological need is at the bottom and an essential one, which is the basis of realizing other higher-level needs. Therefore, after the monster is created, the first thing he has to cope with is his hunger and thirst. "This roused me from my nearly dormant state, and I ate some berries which I found hanging on the trees or lying on the ground. I slaked my thirst at the brook, and then lying down, was overcome by sleep^[4]."

After waking up, he found a large sleeveless coat under a big tree and wrapped it around him to keep out the cold. It was in the middle of winter, shivering with cold, he found a campfire left by several vagrant beggars.

I was overcome with delight at the warmth I experienced from it... When night came again I found, with pleasure, that the fire gave light as well as heat and that the discovery of this element was useful to me in my food, for I found some of the offals that the travellers had left had been roasted, and tasted much more savoury than the berries I gathered from the trees. I tried, therefore, to dress my food in the same manner, placing it on the live embers. I found that the berries were spoiled by this operation, and the nuts and roots much improved^[4].

The knowledge of fire is the first step for the monster to understand human civilization. He found that fire not only warms and glows his surrounding, but also barbecues food to improve its taste. The discovery and utilization of fire improved the monster's material life. After the temporary realization of mild satiety, seeking a habitat became the most intractable problem in front of him. Safety need instead of physiological need became his supreme need.

After a few days of foraging for sustenance, he encountered a village of modest but well-kept cottages. Suffering from the intense hunger pangs of a giant man-child, he innocently entered one of the dwellings, drawn by the aroma of freshly cooked food, and he was shocked when the occupants screamed, fainted, or scattered in terror. The entire village was quickly roused into action, and the monster was viciously and repeatedly attacked until, "grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons," he fled for his life, finally reaching the safety of the pathless forest.

After putting many miles between himself and his attackers, the creature found humble refuge "in a low hovel, quite bare, and wretched". This cramped shelter had a dirt floor, and icy winds whistle through large chinks in the walls. The hovel, barely large enough for his huge frame, was attached to the rear of the De Lacey cottage^[5]. Although the cottage was so short that the monster could only barely sit upright inside, the shed was impervious to rain and snow and the ground was dry, which was already a wonderful residence for him. After the proper arrangement for his sustenance, he "resolved to reside in this hovel until something should occur which might alter my determination."^[4]

Now that the physiological and safety needs, categorized as deficit need, of the monster have been basically met. According to Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs, the higher level of need will rise to the main motive force of the monster's behavior, namely, the need of belongingness and love.

2.2. Loss of Belongingness and Love: the Beginning of Self-destruction

Those in pursuit of belongingness and love need value friendship and desire for a happy family. They are eager to get certain recognition and acceptance, and establish a harmonious interpersonal relationship with the people around them. If this need is not met, the individual will have a strong sense of loneliness, alienation and an extremely painful experience. Born with a mind innocent and pure as a blank paper, the monster eventually turns into a devil for lack of love and a sense of belonging.

In his initial encounter with the world, the monster's sensory experience taught him the function of fire, housing, and language. Also, "through a small and almost imperceptible chink" in a hovel, he observed the "gentle manners" of his human neighbors—the De Lacey family—which touched him so deeply as to stop him from stealing some of the family's food for his own consumption. More importantly,

the encounter kindled his desire to join human society^[6]. In order to shake off the misery of his “accursed origin”, the monster turned himself into an arduous learner of human language—a key to human society^[6]. He studied hard, hoping to change people’s views on him through the accumulation of knowledge and moral cultivation. “I easily perceived that, although I eagerly longed to discover myself to the cottagers, I ought not to make the attempt until I had first become master of their language, which knowledge might enable me to make them overlook the deformity of my figure...”^[4]

The monster’s words expressed his urgent need for communication and recognition. In terms of knowledge accumulation, he diligently observed and learned language every day, and studied *Paradise Lost*, *Celebrity Biography* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* to train his intelligence, which served as his “inexhaustible source of thought”.

Gradually, the monster is able to distinguish between different emotions and, as he began to learn the DeLaceys’ language through observation and repetition, he could label and interpret them^[7]. By watching them through a chink in his out-house and the different ways in which they related to one another, an emotional response was excited in the creature’s own breast. He recalled that when the old man smiled at his children. “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.”^[4]

However, with the increasing mental quality, the monster began to doubt his identity. “Sorrow only increases with knowledge”, the monster exclaimed after mastering human language. The strong desire for belongingness made him miserable. Fortunately, whenever he thought about the virtues of the De Lacey family and their amiable qualities, he felt relieved and got some comfort from it. The monster delighted observing the De Lacey family “through a small chink” between his “hovel” and their adjoining cottage. He regrets the necessity of his self-enforced social distance because “joy had taken the place of sadness in the countenance of my friends”^[8].

I persuaded myself that when they should become acquainted with my admiration of their virtues they would compassionate me and overlook my personal deformity. Could they turn from their door one, however monstrous, who solicited their compassion and friendship? I resolved, at least, not to despair, but in every way to fit myself for an interview with them which would decide my fate^[4].

His desire to master human language aroused from his aspiration to be accepted and loved by the De Lacey family—and indeed, all of human society. However, when he decided to cast himself on the family, hoping to get their recognition, his tragedy began.

The monster chose to visit the blind old man when he was alone at home, so that no one could see his ugly appearance and drive him away. How he hopes that the old man can treat him and care for him fairly like ordinary people! So at the beginning of their conversation, the monster explained: “I am an unfortunate and deserted creature, I look around and I have no relation or friend upon earth. These amiable people to whom I go have never seen me and know little of me. I am full of fears, for if I fail there, I am an outcast in the world forever”^[4].

It was precisely because old De Lacey is blind, and therefore could not defend the monster, that he was receptive to his story and comforted him with the thought that: “Do not despair. To be friendless is indeed to be unfortunate, but the hearts of men, when unprejudiced by any obvious self-interest, are full of brotherly love and charity. Rely, therefore, on your hopes; and if these friends are good and amiable, do not despair”^[4].

The monster then pointed out the reason for his misery: “They are kind—they are the most excellent creatures in the world; but, unfortunately, they are prejudiced against me... they believe that I wish to injure them...”^[4] The old man did not hesitate to tell the monster that he thought he was sincere. If he could do something for him to change people’s prejudice against him, no matter what it is, he would be very glad. This is the first time the monster feels the warmth of human feelings. “How can I thank you, my best and only benefactor? From your lips first have I heard the voice of kindness directed towards me; I shall be forever grateful”^[4].

When the old man asked the name and address of his new friend, the monster was plunged into great pain. Just as he engaged himself in a fierce mental struggle, his only chance to establish a social chain with human beings was deprived by the return of the man’s “young protector”. Although the monster hugged the old man’s knees and looked forward to his approval and help, the old man cried out in horror. “Great God!” “Who are you?”^[4] The old man just stood by and let his son beat him with a stick, which

made the monster's heart "sank within him as with bitter sickness".

The next day when he found that the family had moved away, "a gush of tears somewhat soothed him". He wholeheartedly expected the DeLaceys—who indirectly educated him to be good and kindhearted—to overlook his deformed figure and became his friends, only to find that this virtuous family whom he had "sincerely love[d]" is not much different from the barbarous villagers who attacked him earlier in the novel.

The lack of love and sense of belonging as well as the unfair treatment and misinterpretation infuriated the monster. At night, he piled up all kinds of combustible things around the farmhouse, destroyed all the plants in the garden, and set the farmhouse on fire. This is the monster's first revenge on human beings because of the unsatisfied needs of love and belongingness.

2.3. Self-actualization Deprived of Esteem: the Root of Tragedy

The moistening of love is the core of individual growth. Only when one is loved, accepted, recognized and belongs to somewhere, can he has a sense of security and explore the outside world confidently and boldly, which is the foundation of his existence ^[9].

After suffering from so many unfair treatment and losing the spiritual protection of the De Lacey family, the monster turned to his creator Frankenstein. On his way to Frankenstein, he saved a drowning girl but was shot by her father. When he met Frankenstein's younger brother William, he began to fantasize about making friends with him. To the monster, initially William was "a beautiful child" whom he wished to be his "companion and friend". This pleasant hopefulness quickly turned to rage at the boy's "epithets which carried despair" to the monster's heart and then inspired the murder ^[8].

Excluded from the human society, the monster longed for romantic love but could not obtain it from women. The only person whom he had a relationship with in this world was Frankenstein, his creator. He hoped Frankenstein could create another partner for him and called back his innocent love inside. In pleading with Frankenstein to make him a female counterpart, the monster declared: "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous. ^[4]" He promised Frankenstein he and his mate would recess into the mountainous wilderness never to be seen again.

At first, his request was rejected by Frankenstein for fear that creating another monster would pose a greater threat to humanity. Moved by his desire for love, Frankenstein agreed to create a partner for him as a comfort for his guilt at the same time. However, as the experiment went on step by step, Frankenstein became more and more miserable: "Shall I create another like yourself, whose joint wickedness might desolate the world? Begone! I have answered you; you may torture me, but I will never consent ^[4]." When Frankenstein finally refused his request to make him a mate as deformed as himself, who would regard him as an equal, the monster lost his last chance of self-appreciation.

The monster's only sustenance of love was destroyed in the hands of his creator. His incomparable sense of loss and anger made him turn to the extreme of human nature. A heart of revenge was like a raging fire burning in the monster's chest. He hated the mercilessness of human beings and the injustice of his creator. "Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all mankind sinned against me? ... Even now, my blood boils at the recollection of this injustice ^[4]."

From then on, the monster began to take revenge on humans, especially on Frankenstein. He tried to gain the awe of human beings and realize his value in such retaliation. This time, his pursuit of self-realization was not based on love, respect and satisfaction, but the product of forcible or intentional deprivation and suppression of the demand for love. The benevolence he was able to find in Frankenstein in his love for his family and race, he perverted in himself. "I have murdered the lovely and the helpless; I have strangled the innocent as they slept ... I have devoted my creator, the select specimen of all that is worthy of love and admiration among men, to misery ^[4]."

The monster murdered Frankenstein's good friend Claire, and then killed his bride Elizabeth on her wedding night. From then on, he embarked on the evil road and turned into a real "devil". "Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proven yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I will make you so wretched that the light of day shall be hateful to you. You are my creator but I am your master; obey! ^[4]"

It was the isolation itself, which drove the monster insane and to the evil acts which subsequently ensured the monster that his creator Victor would remain either similarly isolated and alone or the semi-guilty part in the murders of all whom he surrounded himself with ^[10]. When he succeeded in killing his

creator through mental and physical exhaustion in the final chase across the Arctic, he felt only the grief and repentance of an abused child. "That is also my victim! ... in his murder my crimes are consummated; the miserable series of my being is wound to a close! Oh, Frankenstein generous and self-devoted being! What does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me? I, who destroyed thee by destroying all thou lovedst [4]."

For the monster, with extremely strong physique but weak spirit, deprived of the need of belonging, love and self-esteem, he could not feel the meaning of life. Therefore, even when he succeeded in his revenge, he did not feel the slightest joy and chose to leave the world. His own death was his only means of consolation and absolution [7].

3. Conclusion

Maslow's hierarchical theory of needs makes a reasonable explanation for the tragic fate of the monster in *Frankenstein* from the psychological point of view. As Mary Shelley indicates in her foreword "the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue. [4]" Shelley's successful attempt to humanize the monster and demonize its creator is soundly assisted by paralleling their emotional experiences. The novel ends with the monster's physical demise only assumed, but clearly both he and his creator share the psychological ruin toward which each have steadily progressed throughout the plot [8]. Human's abuse of science and ignorance is an important external cause of the tragic fate of the monster. However, through the above analysis, we can see that the role of demand pyramid is the internal cause of his tragedy.

Individuals benefit from aligning themselves with the force of goodness in the universe only in so far as this liberates and ennobles them. Whilst the creature plans his supplication to old De Lacey, he foregoes his hatred and bitterness and gains his dignity as an individual. He describes this to Frankenstein as allowing himself to 'ramble in the fields of Paradise'. Where he deludes himself is in looking beyond the strength and warmth of his emotions and expecting them to improve his life in a tangible and realist sense. When the world cannot sustain his feelings, the evil within him reasserts itself, destroying his hope for solace with the thirst for revenge [7]. The monster desires to be deeply understood and sincerely accepted, but the cruelty of the social environment makes his character increasingly surly and morbid.

When we see the monster's hatred externalizes into a series of revenge actions, it occurs to us that in our society it is crucial to solve the basic needs of social members, especially the vulnerable groups. The psychological course of the monster's revenge has a lot of enlightenment for us to build a harmonious society today.

References

- [1] Tang, W. W. (2008). *Irresistible Fate -- an Analysis of the Tragic Life of the Monster in Frankenstein from the Perspective of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory*. *Journal of Institute of Education (Social Science)*, 2, 81-83.
- [2] Huang, F. M. (2004). *Theory of Needs and Its Application*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2.
- [3] Maslow, A. H. (1987). *Self-actualizing Man*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 152.
- [4] Mary, S. (1991). *Frankenstein*. New York: Bantam Books, 99, 101, 110, 88, 128, 131, 132, 80, 196-197, 152, 194, 1-2.
- [5] Thompson, T. W. (2000). *Shelley's FRANKENSTEIN. The Explicator*, (4) 58, 192.
- [6] Chao, S. L. (2010). *Education as a Pharmakon in Mary Shelley's FRANKENSTEIN. The Explicator*, (4) 68, 223-224.
- [7] Hetherington, T. (1997). *Creator and Created in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. The Keats-Shelley Review*, (1) 11, 25, 19, 35.
- [8] Coleman, J. R. (2004). *Shelley's FRANKENSTEIN. The Explicator*, (1) 63, 22.
- [9] Wang, Q. Y. (2012). *An Analysis of the Eccentric Behavior in Frankenstein from the Perspective of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory. Social Science Front*, 2, 273-274.
- [10] LeCussan (2001). *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus. The Keats-Shelley Review*, (1) 15, 114.