Revisiting Bernard Rose's *Frankenstein*: Ugliness and Exclusion

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Abstract

Mary Shelley's attempt to present what Ellen Moers labels as a 'female gothic' seems to endorse rigid notions of beauty: the transgression of socially approbated ideals of beauty leads to textual disposal in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Frankenstein's desertion of the creation, for instance, testifies to the writer's conscious effort to portray the beautiful and the ugly within the ambit of societal expectations of physical attractiveness. It is interesting to study the representation of the narrative in cinema because the transposition of Mary Shelley's description into characters played by actors in reality is further influenced by the director's perceptions of the textual reading as well as his presumptions of beauty. Bernard Rose's film titled, *Frankenstein* (2015), appropriates the original text for public consumption: the monster's initial corporeal beauty is transformed into supposed hideousness due to Frankenstein's attempt to further augment his creation's physical strength. The insertion of the monster's Oedipal desire for Elizabeth supplements the investigation in the element of romance that is somewhat governed by the internalisation of conventional ideas of beauty. This paper endeavours to critique the contrast between the textual and cinematic portrayal of Frankenstein's monster by examining the duality in the promotion of beauty in Rose's film and contrasting it with the narrative space within Mary Shelley's 1818 edition.

Keywords: Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, Bernard Rose, Monster, Ugliness, Exclusion.

Introduction

The creations of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Rose's Frankenstein have been referred to as the 'monster' in the article. By using this reference, I do not seek to ignore the politics of monstrosity as discussed by several critics in context of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, titled *Frankenstein*. Since the film manipulates the viewers' gaze at Frankenstein's creation by using the word 'monster' in its subtitles every time he creates an incoherent sound, I attempt to approach the cinematic text by taking into account the outcome of Rose's usage of visuality.

Paul O'Flinn[1] suggests that *Frankenstein*[2] (1818) undergoes 'alteration and realignment' through the operation of criticism, as a function of the shift of the text from one medium to another, and as a result of the unfolding of history itself. This leads toward the conclusion that the textual space within *Frankenstein* can be made to mean different things with the passage of time because of philosophical and cultural developments in the social realm. Irrespective of authorial intention, the interpretation of the text can be reconstructed after the adoption of a different outlook.

The recent scholarship around Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has positioned the novel within moral fable, political allegory and dystopian science fiction enveloped with Gothic traits. The interpretative scope of the story has transgressed generic divides to establish its oeuvre in various appropriations of drama, cartoon and cinema. In this article, I attempt to study the perpetuation of idealised notions of beauty in Bernard Rose's *Frankenstein*[3] (2015) to enable the comprehension of the theological impulse of interlinking the ugly with the evil, and further examine the monster's body under the arena of social anxiety.

Frankenstein (2015) is one of the many contemporary attempts at adaption of the novelistic discourse within Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). The narratology within the film has been simplified since the monster's outlook is the only narrative agent that dictates the discourse on the altered story to the modern viewers. My argument focusses on social attitudes towards physical appearance, particularly the film's divergence from Kantian[4] and Burkean aesthetics, and interweaves within its analysis a series of references to the Oedipal complex.

The modifications introduced by Rose in the contemporary cinematic adaptation engineer a distinct addition to the module of Gothic theory. Mary Shelley's darkly brooding protagonist with his haunted past is replaced by Rose's brooding monster who narrates the misfortune of his existence to the film's implied viewers. The materialisation of the novel's story into the audio-visual mode of cinema that is supported by advanced technology augments the paraphernalia of horror.

More importantly, the film redefines contemporary understanding of the Gothic. Ellen Moers[5] aptly observes that Mary Shelley introduced the process of birth in her fiction as an element of Gothic fantasy, not a component of realism. Rose's film refashions the process of narration to diametrically shift the viewers' reception of this phenomenal story: it ventures to experiment with the narrative to inaugurate novel critical analysis of Mary Shelley's 1818 edition as well as Gothic studies.

In this article, I examine two primary strands: first, I endeavour to explore the process and impact of transformation of the monster's physical features from the supposed domain of beauty to that of ugliness. I undertake the inspection of the scientific acquisition of seemingly ugly bodily features as a consequence of Frankenstein's desire to increase the physical strength of his creature and remove his external deformity.

Finally, I discuss the significance of inserting the character of a prostitute for the monster's sexual satisfaction. Malthusian[6] assertion of the association of the sexualised body with dirt in juxtaposition with the Victorian[7] positioning of the prostitute as a 'sewered' body complicates the procedure of examining the sexual activity between the prostitute in the film and the monster. This leads to the interrogation of standardised notions of beauty by inspecting the distorted body of the monster and the sexually exploited body of the prostitute. Using these arguments, the article illustrates Rose's significant addition to the existing scholarship around *Frankenstein*.

The Transition from Beauty to Ugliness

Rose's *Frankenstein* (2015) deviates from Mary Shelley's 1818 novel by engaging in the exhibition of a distinct process of the monster's birth. Frankenstein works with a 'team' to materialise his scientific ambition into reality but keeps the breakthrough of the methodology of giving life to the initial residue with himself. The decision to disconnect from the textual establishment of Frankenstein as an isolated being aids the reconstruction of his graphic character: the renewed portrayal for the twenty-first century viewers reveals

a man who works with a team in spite of his will to preserve a certain degree of secrecy related to the construction of his monster.

The teamwork is effective in the production of a creature that conforms to socially approbated ideals of beauty. Elizabeth, the first human whom the monster encounters after gaining consciousness, whispers, 'So beautiful' while holding his 'beautiful' countenance in her hands. Her characterisation of the conscious monster as 'beautiful' in juxtaposition with Frankenstein's skepticism about the actual possibility of accomplishment of his professional ambition results in an ambiguity while simultaneously leading to the perpetuation of patriarchal ideals.

Frankenstein's suspicion of the monster's consciousness as a movement consequent of what he perceives to be 'muscle spasms' is puzzling because he is expected to be excited at the prospect of his success. Further, the fact that Elizabeth can sense the monster's consciousness while Frankenstein cannot, not only reinforces the popular discourse of maternal sensitivity, but also depletes Elizabeth's professional capacity as a research scientist by shifting the central focus to her maternal responsibility.

The initial projection of the monster as a beautiful creature thematises ugliness as an acquired phenomenon. Textual notions of beauty are dismantled because of the capability of scientific advancements to manufacture and manoeuvre physical appearance of living beings. While the monster's social circumstances in the novelistic tradition are congruous to the conditions that immediately precede the classist rejection of Gallagher's potato[8] by the English bourgeois because of its association with the proletariat population, the monster's circumstances in the film are not. The idea of accuracy in the accomplishment of Frankenstein's objective is perhaps translated into cinematic reality because of the potency of scientific developments in the contemporary age.

The physical appearance of the monster in the film undergoes manifold transformations by the insertion of multiple narratorial tools. The combination of Frankenstein's interest in the monster as a mere scientific experiment and the eruption of a scarlet-coloured pimple-like protrusion that ultimately resembles a pus-filled boil lead to the monster's biopsy and concludes in the expansive replication of the boils across his entire body. Frankenstein's impatience with a minor, seemingly ugly and abnormal protrusion incites him to extend the magnitude of scientific experimentation with his initial enterprise. This contributes to the nullification of the cinematic incorporation of Frankenstein's team that plays the role of diminishing his isolation in the pursuit of his endeavours. Rose, like Mary Shelly, is successful in presenting and appropriating the portrait of an overambitious scientist who fails to recognise the ramifications of attempting to transgress the limitations of humankind.

Since the shift of the story from the novel to cinema necessitates a change in the plot even before the consideration of content and its politics, the insertion of new events in the film is inevitable. However, the construction of a 'beautiful' creature and his transmogrification after biopsy into a seemingly hideous being entails the introduction of a pressing question within critical analysis: has the meaning of scientific transgression evolved with time?

The possibility of production of a living being after scientific intervention was viewed as transgression of nature in the Romantic age because of the improbability of such an occurrence. The dynamic advancements in science and technology from the latter half of the twentieth century are responsible in making the appearance of the idea of such a procedure plausible: the possibility of contemporary scientists to replicate and materialise fabricated ideas in science fiction necessitates the investigation of the notion of transgression. For the twenty-first century viewer, transgression of nature is not the act of creation of the monster, but rather the persistent need to beautify the monster. This

bears witness to the evolvement of the meaning of what constitutes violation of natural laws imposed upon humankind.

The need and impact of the procedure of 'de-beautifying' the monster are fundamental to comprehend Frankenstein's professional expectations as well as his repulsion with the subsequent outcome of deviation from societal expectations of beauty, despite the fact that the onus of the monster's physical transformation lies with his own impatience with imperfection. On witnessing the aftermath of biopsy, Frankenstein remarks, 'I don't want talk about it right now,' and leaves the room with Dr Marcus. Later, he tells Elizabeth that 'this is not what I [he] intended.' His conversation exposes the intention of his experiment: the success of his extraordinary pursuit remains unsatisfactory until the product becomes presentable to the society in terms of external appearance. This advances the examination of the proliferating discourses on contemporary consumption of external appearance keeping in mind the body's physical attractiveness.

The manner in which the textual and the cinematic spaces deal with Frankenstein's aversion to the monster varies notably. The repulsion of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is influenced by his realisation that the fiction of his unified self in the mirror stage is identifiable with something outside his self, making him lose, as Mladen Dolar argues, 'that uniqueness that one could enjoy in one's self-being.'[9] Incorporation of psychoanalytic criticism makes the revelation of Frankenstein's horror at witnessing the monster come to life explanatory. In the film, Frankenstein's character is denied the opportunity to exercise the employment of a similar reason to escape the label of myopic disposition.

Rose's Frankenstein, in contrast, refuses to acknowledge that the monster is a 'conscious entity' by arguing that he cannot listen. When the monster murmurs 'Dad' while looking at him, he turns toward Elizabeth and says, 'They're just sounds. Crude sounds. Babies make them and we ascribe meaning to them.' Frankenstein's first response to the initially 'beautiful' monster highlights the fact that the unnatural birth of the monster is sufficient to isolate him from the human world despite the transient possession of external beauty.

External beauty fails to become a denominator that ignites his affection as a parent, leading to the conclusion that the success of the monster's biopsy and his complete beautification after the removal of the scarlet-coloured protrusion would have still not changed Frankenstein's apathy toward him. Considering the extent of his emotional detachment, it is rather evident that he perceives the monster's articulation of affection, as 'crude sounds' after the biopsy is unsuccessful.

Further, Rose's Frankenstein is, unlike Mary Shelley's Frankenstein who is simply an ambitious student of natural philosophy and chemistry, a qualified doctor working with scientific tools to accomplish his task of patrilineal creation. Burke[10] asserts that the ugly is that which the beautiful is not: Rose's Frankenstein's eventual repulsion with the hideous body of the monster is influenced both by Burkean interpretation of ugliness and the culmination of his scientific project into a diseased body.

He cannot be content with a distorted body because the disfigured body is representative of a permanent sickness that a qualified doctor in the twenty-first century finds difficult to approve. In fact, Kantian approach transforms Burke's empiricist aesthetics, but maintains his fundamental assumption of the ugly. Thus, while the grounds of rejection in the text do not transgress beyond Frankenstein's repulsion with Burkean understanding of ugliness, the rationale of abortion of scientific pursuit in the film also inculcates Frankenstein's outlook toward his creation from the lens of a professional doctor.

Dr Marcus and Dr Pretorius are assigned the responsibility to dispose the monster's unconscious body after the unsuccessful biopsy due to cell replication and circuitry issues.

The former decides to keep the monster's eyes, each of which took about six months to print, and the latter starts sectioning the cranium to make the access to the eyeballs easier. The process is aborted after the monster wakes up and kills them both. However, the cut marked on his forehead because of the drill makes his face extremely bloody. The combined appearance of boils and blood creates a ghastly-looking creature, the sight of which becomes abominable to humankind.

Whenever his skin comes in contact with water, the blood vanishes and subsequently his skin's increased whiteness and wrinkles augment the hideousness of the boils on his countenance. His injuries appear even more grotesque when a dog licks his face in delight. After he takes a bath in the hotel room as per Wanda's instruction, some boils appear enlarged, suggesting the possible absorption of water. Finally, the evaporation of water primarily functions to visually enhance the whiteness of the monster's skin.

The monster's description of his temporary stay in a nearby forest after escaping from the laboratory is equivalent to the Homeric 'retarding element,' a term coined by Goethe and Schiller in the late eighteenth century. It provides an escape from the gory imagery created earlier within the laboratory and manages to relax the tension within the narrative by serving the purpose of a digression. The projection of the carefully fashioned story of the monster's unexpected sojourn with the accompanying subtitles, which form a part of the film's narration, assists Auerbach's process of externalisation[11] of the phenomena to leave no scope for obscurity. Thus, Rose effectively employs the backdrop of natural landscape against the unnatural body of the monster to manoeuvre the resultant pathetic fallacy toward the process of retardation.

Lastly, the study of Freudian vocabulary of repression distinguishes the ugly from the uncanny by positing that while the uncanniness of an object is subjective to perception, ugliness is universally offensive. The consolidation of cinematic tools in Rose's *Frankenstein* impels the constitution of the monster's ugly body that stimulates fear by virtue of its diseased appearance.[12] Therefore, even though the monster is not opposed to those qualities that are not opposed to ugliness, his transformed appearance becomes opposed to those qualities that constitute beauty. This can be reaffirmed by Gigante's interpretation[13] of Burkean thought in the aesthetic discourse within the context of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The representation of beauty in Rose's film is therefore supremely inter-twisted in spite of the absence of literary or cinematic intertextuality that is otherwise abound in the 1818 edition.

Ugliness, Filth and Exclusion: The Monster and the Prostitute

A blind African blues singer named Eddie replaces Mary Shelley's De Lacey family. The necessity of retaining a visually disabled character during the process of substitution of the De Lacey family stems from the need to conceal the monster's apparent external hideousness. Eddie's first interaction with the monster leads him to conclude that the monster can barely communicate in English. The monster's inability to initiate proper conversation and Eddie's blindness binds them together on account of their disability. Rose's film ventures to add the character of a prostitute within the narrative framework; the monster is acquainted with Wanda when she meets Eddie, her old friend.

The role of the prostitute is essential toward the comprehension of what constitutes the making of Lacquerian modern body. Corbin's[14] assertion that the prostitute is compelled to enter the domain of filth because of the connection between sexual activity and sanitation helps to foreground the comparison of ugliness between Wanda and the monster, and

their exclusion from conscious participation in the society as a consequence of having undesirable bodies. Wanda's body is thus a 'sewer' for the society's carnal excretions.

She asks the monster to take a bath before she can engage in sexual intercourse with him because she presumes that his visible filthiness might somewhat diminish after it gets in contact with a purifying liquid like water. Her assumption stems from the social premise that one of the many functions of water is to act as a means of purification. When she sees the monster's naked body after his supposed purification, she is instantly repelled by the expanse of seemingly contagious boils on his body. Her resistance to his purified body is symptomatic of the societal rejection that he continually encounters since he is viewed as an outsider who threatens to contaminate the normative physical substratum of humankind.

The fact that a prostitute, who is excluded from societal transactions on account of the symbolic interconnection between the sexualised body and dirt, refuses to engage in coital activity with the monster, who is epitomised as a symbol of human transgression of natural phenomenon, complicates the degrees of exclusion for those who have been shifted to the periphery after the process of otherisation. If the bodies of both Wanda and the monster are key narratives in a cinematic text that focusses on the marginalised, then what markers of differentiation can be employed to separate one excluded body from another? Wanda's rejection of the monster gains significance since it displays his continual exclusion even within the faction of the othered.

The monster's desire for Elizabeth resurfaces in his private conversation with Wanda before he takes a bath. After Wanda shows him a video of sexual intercourse and the process of delivering a baby, he supposedly becomes educated about the politics of sex, realises that he cannot remember his childhood, and proceeds to look at Elizabeth's identity card that he had taken while escaping from Frankenstein's laboratory.

His gaze can be interpreted as an outcome of Wanda's attempt at sex education, and the subsequent outburst of his desire to engage in sexual intercourse with Elizabeth. When Wanda notices him gazing at Elizabeth's picture and asks if he wants to 'fuck' Elizabeth, he gives an affirmative answer. However, his gaze can also be read as an indication of his yearning to inquire about his apparently lost childhood and discuss the process of his birth with his maternal parent.

Insertion of pornographic clip that only focusses on the portrayal of the sexualised female body is interesting because of its deliberate deviation from its original purpose to suit the context of the film. Pornographic video, which is produced for titillating the sexual desires of the viewers, serves to function as an audio-visual tool that enables Wanda to educate the monster about sexual intimacy. The nudity in the videoclip explicitly operates to eroticise the female body.

Therefore, Rose disintegrates the dualism of exclusion that is distributed amongst Wanda and the monster and adds the figure of the naked woman in the pornographic clip to complicate the multiplicity of the layers of exclusion within the text. Ironically, even though the sexualised body of the woman in the videoclip is sufficiently appealing for the objective of creating pornography, it is still excluded from the social realm because of its engagement in an activity that monetises the act of intercourse by making the filmed video available for public consumption. Rose's addition of certain sections of the pornographic videoclip supplements the element of irony because he too is interested in capitalising on the eroticised portrayal of the female body within the video.

In the film, Frankenstein's process of deformation makes the monster's body a non-form, which augments the human impulse to associate the ugly with the evil. This

association makes him an undesirable social companion and leads to his abandonment even within the division of minority of which he becomes an unwilling component. Rose's Frankenstein resembles Mary Shelley's Frankenstein for the reason that both fail to employ the Kantian concept of 'categorial imperative,' which is first mentioned in Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.[15]

Further, Wanda's rejection assumes the rationality of popular action of social exclusion and manifests her adherence to what is perceived to be human norm. It raises an integral question for the monster's prospects, if any, in the human world: does Wanda's rejection imply universal desertion of the monster by offering the moral economy of explanation that repeatedly advances the argument of his repugnant physical appearance? Though the film does not venture to provide a conclusive answer, it does hint at the monster's state of perpetual loneliness by depriving him of human companionship and destroying the few relationships, which he is able to temporarily sustain.

Conclusion

The prohibition of the monster's admission in the societal realm becomes inevitable after Rose's Frankenstein completes his unsuccessful biopsy that leads to the metamorphosis of the monster's skin. An unexpected eruption of scarlet-coloured boils leads to the attachment of the label of monstrosity to the monster. He is unsuccessful in retaining the initial acceptance by his creators, especially by Frankenstein. Frankenstein aborts any further attempts to remodel his creature's physical appearance for social sanction.

The only lasting relationship that he manages to establish is that with a dog, who remains with him after his escape from the laboratory and is eventually killed by a police officer during a dispute. The film seems to subtly suggest that the monster cannot expect to find a human companion who will accept him after viewing his physical deformation. Eddie, his temporary companion, is unable to gauge the extent of physical damage that restricts the monster's social advancement. Wanda refuses to engage in copulation with him in spite of his supposed purification by water. The only companion that the film allows him to have is a dog, which cannot perceive and understand the world from human imagination.

Frankenstein's monster therefore becomes the object of detestation because his body performs the synecdochical function of representing the aesthetics of ugliness. Rose's film utilises the popular myth of the ugliness of pimple-like boils, and projects it upon the monster's skeleton to underscore universal repulsion. Societal exclusion fails to become a common denominator to bind Wanda and the monster because of the difference in the degree of disgust that their bodies evoke.

Maternal affection, too, becomes ambiguous when Elizabeth's stance on the monster appears blurred in the narrative. His appearance is sufficient to eradicate the materialisation of his phantasmagoria and consequently the possibility of his union with Elizabeth. Any probability of their relationship is anyway undermined by the politics of belonging which governs the landscape, but the addition of the monster's repulsive physicality makes the idea of their romantic partnership diametrically improbable.

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Notes

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