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The Subject Construction in *Frankenstein*

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Abstract

The present analysis is intended to shed light on the problem of the subject, its relationship to language in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the light of modern psychoanalytical criticism. Lacan who provided a radical re-reading and revising of the texts of Freud shows that the unconscious is structured like a language and considers that there is a close connection between subject construction and language. Language exists as a structure before the individual enters it. The entry into language enables us to find a subject position within the system. This brief investigation is hoped to familiarise the reader with the significance and function of the language in the construction of subject and the difficulty of creating any stable meaning through language in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein.*

Key words*: Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, The symbolic Order, The imaginary Stage, the construction of the subject.*

Özet

Bu çalışma, Mary Shelly' nin *Frankenstein* adlı eserinde kişilik oluşumu ile dil arasındaki sıkı bağı modern psikoanalitik eleştiri yöntemini kullanarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Freud' un yazılarını yeni ve radikal bir biçimde ele alan Lacan, bilinçaltının dil gibi yapılanmış olduğunu ve kişilik oluşumuyla dil arasında yakın bir ilişki olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Dilin kişilik gelişiminden önce var olan bir sistem olduğunu ve bu sisteme girişle bir kişilik kazandığımızı ileri sürmüştür. Bu çalışma kişilik oluşumunda dilin fonksiyonu ve önemi üzerinde durarak okuyucuya Mary Shelley'nin *Frankenstein* adlı eserinde benzer bir ilişkinin nasıl çarpıcı bir şekilde ortaya konduğunu ve dille anlamı yakalamanın güçlüğünü göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler*: Mary Shelley, Frankenstein Dil, Mutlu dönem, Kişilik oluşumu.*

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Part narrative and part indeterminacy, part sentiment and part metaphor, *Frankenstein* is one of the most enigmatic novels, which presents the reader not only with a fictional narrative but also with an exploration of the medium of narrative, that is, language. The stories within the novel pull the reader into narrative frames and chains whose power to affect arises from the novel's experiments with the relationships between human cognition and narrative. *Frankenstein* invites its readers into its complex narrative body and confronts them with a series of shifting perspectives through language. To explore the connection between these perspectives is to uncover the relationship between author, text and reader. It is possible to suppose that the novel's presentation of various views of the nature of language is a medium for representing the elusiveness of the text. It is a text whose meaning is difficult to pinpoint. Although the text attracts many readers, it is composed of a succession of interdependent stories which develop new perceptual skills and processes that enable the reader to read in a new perspective. Mary Shelley may have had constant anxiety about language and about the possibility of achieving any knowledge through language. *Frankenstein* is a text which eludes its readers who try to control its play on meaning. It resembles modernist texts in its avoidance of a governing narrative position and its free play of meaning. Through the medium of language, Shelley proposes an understanding of "subject" in terms of a scheme composed of layers of structures.

The problem of "subject" has always preoccupied the Western thought which has presumed the necessity of a unified subject and unified consciousness whose medium of perceiving objects is language. The psychoanalytic writings of Lacan have given critics a new theory of the subject, "a new emphasis on the unconscious itself, as the nucleus of our being" (Barry, 1995, 109). As pointed out by Terry Eagleton, "Lacan's work is a strikingly original attempt to 'rewrite' Freudianism in ways relevant to all those concerned with the question of the human subject, its place in society and above all its relationship to language" (142). Within literary studies, Lacan is discussed in relation to his theories of language, and as a post-structuralist, he uses Saussere's model of the relationship between the signifier and the signified which constructs subjects within the symbolic order in order to apply his linguistic model to psychoanalysis:

> …the displacement of the signifier determines the subjects in their acts, in their destiny, in their refusals, in their blindnesses, in their end and in their fate, their innate gifts and social acquisitions notwithstanding, without regard for character or sex, and that, willing or not, everything that might be considered the stuff of psychology, kit and caboodle, will follow the path of the signifier. (Lacan, 1972, 60)

Lacan reinterprets Freudian theory of the unconscious, and theorizes that the unconscious is structured like language, and "the unconscious processes are identified with the unstable signifier" (Selden, 1985, 164). Language is central to his theory, and "the unconscious is not a chaotic mass of disparate material, as might formerly have been thought, but 'an orderly network, as complete as the structure of a language: 'what the psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language'" (Barry, 111). Lacan considers that identity is structured by language and in language. An individual's entry into a symbolic order, a pre-existing system of signifiers which assumes meaning merely in this system enables the individual to construct subjectivity. To put it another way, the consequence of entering language, according to Lacan, is the formation and evolution of the ego. The linguistically structured unconscious is the first step in subject construction.

Lacan begins with the infant in an amorphous state, with no boundaries to its experience of sense or of need as a jumble he calls 'I'hommelette'-homme-lette, little man; omelette, shapeless mass of egg. Frankenstein's creature has a shapeless mass of bones and profane fingers. Frankenstein says: "I collected bones from charnel-houses and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame" (Shelley, 52). There is no clear distinction between subject and object. Before gender or identity is established, there is only a type of creation and shapeless figure which creates horror and disgust. According to Lacan, all the infants are born into the realm of the imaginary. Frankenstein's creature is born into the imaginary stage in which the symbiotic relationship of the infant, namely the creature with its mother-father is refused strongly due to its filthy physical appearance:

> I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch-the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped and rushed downstairs. I took refuge in the courtyard belonging to the house which I inhabited, where I remained during the rest of the night, walking up and down in the greatest agitation, listening attentively, catching and fearing each sound as if it were to announce the approach of the daemoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life. (56)

Lacan's foregrounding of the unconscious leads him to assume that all subjectivity is based on loss and absence. Frankenstein's creature suffers from the loss in the imaginary stage in which there is no clear distinction between self and other, and it cannot live an idealised identification with its mother-father. In the pre-Oedipal stage, Frankenstein's creature cannot live a symbiotic relation with its mother-father's body. The creature is unaware of the physical limitations of its body. The first difference that the creature learns is of absence: "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. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend" (96). The creature which has been excluded from the imaginary stage is driven into the symbolic order in which the creature will build up himself an identity and a stable meaning. What is instituted at the moment of disruption of the imaginary by the exclusion of the mother-father figure is desire, a drive and urge to return to the utopian state of the imaginary, of oneness and spontaneity from which the subject is banned:

> 'Be calm! I intreat me you to hear me before you give vent to your hatred on my devoted head. Have I not suffered enough, that you seek to increase my misery? Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it. Remember, thou has made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine, my joints more supple. But I will not be tempted to set myself in opposition to thee. I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me. Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. (95-96)

Unfortunately, the creature cannot understand that it will never fulfil its desire. The desire to return back to the blissful, utopian imaginary stage is never fulfilled. The loss of the imaginary is a permanent one. Its desire is repressed, and this act of repression brings the unconscious into being. At an early age, Frankenstein's creature harbours murderously aggressive instincts towards its mother-father's body, entertains fantasies of tearing it to pieces. Lacan defines this process in his article "The Mirror stage as Formative of the Function of the 'I' as revealed in Psychoanalytical Experience" as follows:

> The development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history. The 'mirror stage' is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial

> identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body image to a form of its totality…and lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development. (1977, 4)

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the construction of the subjectivity of the creature occurs in the mirror stage where the creature sees its reflection in the water, namely in the mirror and begins to conceive itself as a unified being, separate from the rest of the world. From the point of the 'Mirror stage,' the subject, the creature becomes established in the realm of the symbolic, the realm of language and representation. The image of the creature in the water and the creature which actually sees that image become severed. The subject is divided: the "I" is a subject of one's own perceptions, while it is also a subject to the authority, namely Frankenstein, the symbolic order or language:

> …how was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am. I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity. (Shelley, 109)

The creature's socialisation process begins with its entrance into the symbolic order. The crucial recognition of the other in the water represents its entrance into the language. The disturbing image in the water provides the creature with a picture of its other self: repressed and monstrous. Its subjecthood is dependent upon the image provided by the other. After it has entered the symbolic order, it recognizes that I that is spoken is not the same as the subject that actually speaks that I. The creature learns to differentiate itself from others. It becomes aware of the symbolic world of the differences:

> I heard of the differences of sexes, and the birth and growth of children; how the father doated on the smiles of the infant, and the lively sallies of the older child; how all the life and cares of the mother were wrapped up in the precious charge; how the mind of youth expanded and gained knowledge; of brother, sister, and all the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds. (116)

The creature's identity as a subject is constituted by its difference and similarity to the other subjects around. It comes to perceive the structure of social and sexual roles and relations which make up the family and society. It suddenly finds itself in a great

hollowness and emptiness to which he is totally unfamiliar: "I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing" (98). The creature is bound to accept that it can never have any direct access to reality. Through language, the creature is turned into a subject which learns and internalises the structures of society. It discovers the existence of science of words and letters which it knows nothing of. The creature's entrance into the symbolic order, namely language, is the turning point in its subjecthood phase. From the point of the language, the subject, the creature becomes established in the realm of language and representation. The creature finds that the people around possess a method of communicating their experiences and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. It perceives that the words they have spoken sometimes produce pleasure or pain, smiles and sorrow in the minds and countenances of the hearers. It ardently desires to become acquainted with it. However, the creature is baffled in every attempt it makes for this purpose.

> Their pronunciation was quick, and the words they uttered, not having any apparent connection with visible objects, I was unable to discover any clue by which I could unravel the mystery of their reference. By great application, however, and after having remained during the space of several revolutions of the moon in my hovel, I discovered the names that were given to some of the most familiar objects of discourse (108).

In gaining access to language, the creature unconsciously learns that linguistic "signs have a meaning by dint of its difference from other signs, and learns also that a sign presupposes the absence of the object it signifies" (Eagleton, 144). According to post-structuralist Lacanian psychoanalysis, the signifier and signified are not closely attached to one another, one signifier relates to another in a long and constantly shifting, open ended chain. It is impossible for the creature to perceive anything in its fullness. It will now wander from one signifier to another, along a linguistic open ended chain. The creature's instinctive needs are shaped by the discourse in which it starts expressing its demand for satisfaction. The creature is divided between the conscious life of its ego and its repressed and unconscious desire which springs from the lack in the imaginary stage. Every conversation of De Lacey family opens new wonders to the creature. The words induce it to turn to itself. It begins to question its existence. It asks many questions to itself about itself and its creator. The creature itself cannot describe the agony that these reflections have inflicted upon it. It tries to dispel them, but it also learns that sorrow only increases with knowledge:

> 'Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling, but I learned that there was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death – a state which I feared yet did not understand. I admired virtue and good feelings and loved the gentle manners and amiable qualities of my cottagers, but I was shut out from intercourse with them, except through means which I obtained by stealth, when I was unseen and unknown, and which rather increased than satisfied the desire I had of becoming one among my fellows. The gentle words of Agatha and the animated smiles of the charming Arabian were not for me. The mild exhortations of the old man and lively conversation of the loved Felix were not for me. Miserable, unhappy wretch! (Shelley, 116)

Entering language doubles the suffering which stems from the desire to turn back to the imaginary stage. Language disrupts the happiness in the imaginary stage which is always inaccessible. That is why the creature always feels miserable and unhappy. The image of the signifier over the signified is the domination of symbolic over the imaginary. It continually reminds the subject, namely the creature, of the loss of the imaginary and its blissful happiness, which is always outside the symbolic order. The desire goes on in the chain of signifiers. The creature's wish to express its desire in words is subverted by the unconscious which is "a continual movement and activity of signifiers, whose signifieds are often inaccessible to us because they are repressed" (Eagleton, 146). The creature goes on living a split personality, divided between the conscious life of the ego and the unconscious, or its repressed desire.

The symbolic order, namely language, does not make any sense for the creature since it is an empty world which constructs subjectivity according to its requirements, and the subject is constructed as a passive being, as opposed to the conventional idea of the subject as a stable assemblage of consciousness. Language is an endless process of difference and absence. From now on the creature will move from one signifier to another. One signifier relates to another in a long and constantly shifting open-ended chain, and the creature becomes a part of this signifying chain. Its subjectivity, its experience of its body and mind are determined by the function of language. It is instable and a linguistically constructed subject. It acts like a signifier by producing subject positions for the characters in the narrative. It becomes established in the realm of language.

The creature looks for a blissful relationship in language, but it is totally rejected. Its search for a substitute-mother, the imaginary mother is replaced by its wish for a woman creature which resembles its own image with whom it will be able to communicate and also circumvent the maternal needs. It needs a mirror, a framed surface on which always

appears its double with which it can identify. Since the imaginary mother has been lost for the creature, its desire for a maternal body which will touch and give blissful pleasure is transformed into a female creature:

> You must create a female for me with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. …This passion is detrimental to me, for you do not reflect that you are the cause of its excess. If any being felt emotions of benevolence towards me, I should return them a hundred and a hundredfold; for that one creature's sake I would make peace with the whole kind! But I now indulge in dreams of bliss that cannot be realised. What I ask of you is reasonable and moderate; I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself; the gratification is small, but it is all that I can receive, and it shall content me. (Shelley, 140-141)

It longs for the maternal bliss which cannot be realised in the imaginary stage. The only way to satisfy its desire for the maternal body is in the very terms that can be realised by a female body. Frankenstein prevents the creature from having maternal bliss, usurps and destroys the life-giving power of the feminine body by refusing to create a female who will offer the primal bliss of the imaginary stage for it.

The monster's desire for a female partner has double function. It does not only explain its wish to turn back to the imaginary stage, but it indicates the monster's attempts into the symbolic order through which it will prove its existence and will create a new society in South America as well:

> If you consent, neither you nor any other human beings shall ever see us again; I will go to the vast wilds of South America. …If I have no ties and no affections, hatred and vice must be my portion; the love of another will destroy the cause of my crimes, and I shall become a thing of whose existence every one will be ignorant. My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor, and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being and become linked to the chain of existence and events from which I am now excluded. (141,142,143)

Frankenstein gives birth to a creature which belongs and can belong neither to the imaginary stage nor to the symbolic order. The creature is shunned and hated by all mankind. Wherever it goes, people reject it. The necessity of a unified subject, the question of being exist as a subject, and above all its relationship with the symbolic order lead it to create a new society in another place, which would be a new, as Peter Brooks points out, "systematic network of relation akin to the symbolic order" (591-605). It wishes to enter the social life, to have a family, to keep communication, and to

enter the symbolic order. Frankenstein's refusal of creating a female monster can be seen as a rejection of the woman as a life-giving power into the symbolic order. As Luce Irigaray argues, "from within the phallocentric regime of the symbolic order, a genuinely feminine body is inconceivable; woman is either an inferior version of man, or she does not exist" (23). The symbolic order negates and excludes the feminine body.

Neither the imaginary nor the symbolic can fully satisfy the creature's existence and subjecthood which remain out somewhere beyond its reach. As pointed out by Fred Botting, "a split appears between his imaginary recognition of himself, a sutured and fragmented bodily collage, and his subjectivity, adopted in the symbolic order: the monster, as visible monster, is alienated from himself, his linguistically adopted subjectivity" (15). The creature has discovered the fact that from now on it seems impossible for it to turn back to the imaginary stage, the blissful relationship with its mother-father, from which it has been barred. When it has understood that it will not be able to enter the symbolic order, being excluded from both realms, it suddenly indulges in its unconscious, its repressed unconscious in which the creature harbours murderously aggressive instincts towards its mother-father's body, entertains fantasies of tearing it to pieces. As a result of the great disillusionment it has lived, despair takes possession of it:

> CURSED, cursed creator! …my feelings were those of rage and revenge…I gave vent to my anguish in fearful howlings. I was like a wild beast that had broken the toils, destroying the objects that obstructed me and ranging through the wood with a staglike swiftness. Oh! What a miserable night I passed!...I like the arch-fiend, bore a hell within me, and finding myself unsympathized with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat down and enjoyed the ruin. I…sank on the damp grass in the sick impotence of despair. …From that moment I declared ever-lasting war against the species, and more than all, against him who had formed me and sent me forth to this insupportable misery. (Shelley, 131)

Excluded from the imaginary stage and the symbolic order, it begins haunting Frankenstein. The process, then, starts to work in the reverse order for him. Nothing is more painful to him than to be threatened by his own creation, which aims to exclude him from the symbolic order upon which there appears a harsh power struggle. Its aim is to make him feel the same pain he has felt during its own adventure. It is time Frankenstein experinced the same processes the creature lived before. The creature's ultimate aim is to break Frankenstein's connection with the symbolic order. The threat which is directed to the subjecthood of Frankenstein, his place in society, and above all

his relationship with the symbolic order aims to destroy the bliss in which Frankenstein exists. Henceforth, he becomes the monster's mirror in which it sees its own reflection. When the monster gazes at him, it sees an image which is already monstrous in the eyes of the creature. As pointed out by Bloom, "his desperate desire for a mate is clearly an attempt to find a Shelleyan Epipsyche or Blakean Emanation for himself, a self within the self. But as he is the nightmare actualisation of Frankenstein's desire, he is himself an emanation of Promethean yearnings, and his only double is his creator and denier" (10). Metaphorically, the creature finds its double, his creator, who has had the same experience at the beginning of the novel when Frankenstein has seen himself in the visual image on the window through which the creature's image is reflected back.

The creature from which Frankenstein escapes is his double, namely himself. The one who is seen as the other in the mirror is the one who sees it. Frankenstein's unconscious process is identified with the unstable signifier, the creature. Up to that time, there has not been a distinction between Frankenstein's self and the other in the mirror. He has conceived himself as a unified being. Frankenstein's nominal identity 'I' is a misrecognition of himself as unified and coherent. He stands at the axis of signifier and signified, a split being, never able to give his position a full presence. His subjecthood is dependent on the image provided by the other, the creature. His self is reflected with the creature. There is another in the mirror that it must depend on for his self definition. The competition over the domination of the symbolic order leads them to see each other as their competitors. They compete with their own selves in a metaphoric sense.

As can seen in the discussion of *Frankenstein*, self-recognition is the first act in the process of gaining subjectivity. It starts with entrance into the symbolic order. Through language, the subject learns and develops his existence. It profoundly affects our way of life, our point of view, our mind, shortly the subject is constructed through language. Since human unconscious is structured like language, the processes cannot be identified with stable signifiers. Due to the signifieds which are repressed and hidden, it is difficult to pinpoint stable meanings with the continual activity of the signifiers. In the Lacanian sense of signs, the signified slides beneath the signifier. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a good example which proves that language is not something which refers to things and which expresses ideas. The text can be seen as a metaphor which sheds light on the aspects of the unconscious.

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