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The Fall of Enlightenment Master and the Rise of the Idealist Hysteric: A Lacanian-Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Marry Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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ABSTRACT

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is one of the most influential literary works reflecting on the relationships between knowledge, authority, subjectivity, and ethical boundaries in modern science. Written at the historical intersection of Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic skepticism, the novel's narrative dramatizes the central contradiction of the collapse of scientific control, which unfolds when knowledge is separated from responsibility, recognition, and symbolic accountability. Most existing interpretations of the novel only critique science, not providing a systematic perspective on the logic of Enlightenment scientific authority from its formation to its eventual collapse. Against this research gap, this study puts forward its main question: How does *Frankenstein* represent Enlightenment scientific authority and its collapse? The goal of this study is to analyze premises of this authority, from its construction and legitimation to its eventual demise. It adopts a Lacanian-Foucauldian discourse analysis framework, drawing on theoretical notions and concepts from the three theorists Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Slavoj Žižek to carry out its analysis. It breaks through the conventional reading, which only defines Victor as an ambitious scientist, and positions him as an Enlightenment master who dictates the knowledge of his era, while the Creature is framed as the hysterical subject that dismantles his authority. It surpasses the widespread reading that *Frankenstein* merely offers a critique of science and interprets the novel as a profound reflection on the Enlightenment logic and Romantic spirit.

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1. Introduction

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) has ripped open a hard-to-heal wound at the core of modern systems of knowledge, piercing a long-obscured boundary: humanity's quest for knowledge can no longer be distinguished from its desire for total domination, having fully merged into the darker problems of modernity. This view is far from an adventure story most readers take it for, that of a young scientist who accidentally uncovers the secret of life. The protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, carries the most enticing yet dangerous myth of Enlightenment rationality: he firmly believes that humanity, relying solely on pure scientific will, can break through every boundary nature has imposed on existence. Yet Shelley dismantles this myth from its core. The Creature which Victor toils relentlessly to create is not only the inherent contradiction of this so-called "scientific success" and the excess which spills outside established order, but also a living accusation which deflates this delusional fantasy. The relational responsibilities, which the dominant discourse of science has always shut out, the ethics of obligation toward the other, and all the deliberately erased dimensions of human life launch a tangible, retaliatory backlash made manifest through the Creature's existence. The novel's narrative likewise shifts: it begins anchored in the absolute certainty that science can control all things, then slides into a disordered field where the creator can no longer have mastery over his own creation.

Within the field of *Frankenstein* studies, the most influential critical tradition interprets *Frankenstein* as a critique of Enlightenment rationality, unrestricted scientific progress, and the ideological promise that knowledge can liberate humanity from all limitations (see Levine, 1973; Knoepfelmacher, 1979; Hindle, 1990; Rauch, 1995; Ruston, 2019; Nicholson, 2020). Three distinct research orientations under this tradition each carry their own core focus: Core judgments at the foundational level argue that Victor's scientific ambitions long outgrew a private drive for exploration and instead represent a historically fraught fantasy of manipulating nature and controlling the creation of life. Extended interpretations that combine feminist and science-focused perspectives contend that the pursuit of knowledge is bound to patriarchal control, as it usurps reproductive rights, turning science into an instrument of authority rather than a vehicle for ethical understanding. Supplementary corrective studies note that Mary Shelley does not reject science itself but instead interrogates the cultural conditions that grant scientific knowledge social authorization and institutional legitimacy while severing it from accountability (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Moers, 1979; Poovey, 1980; Mellor, 1988; Butler, 1993; London, 1993; Hoeveler, 2003). This scholarship ultimately locates the novel's core value in this: by exposing the destruction, alienation, and moral blindness spawned by an extreme desire for total control, the text complicates the Enlightenment's inherent belief in rational progress.

In the studies focused on the Creature in *Frankenstein*, a second core cluster of existing scholarship has centered its inquiry on monstrosity, subjectivity, social exclusion, and the monster's struggles for recognition. Existing research has overturned the stereotypical view that the Creature is inherently evil, arguing that monstrosity is produced when society constructs difference as a threat through exclusion and fear (see Brooks, 1978; Baldick, 1987a, 1987b; Botting, 1991; Halberstam, 1995; González Moreno & González Moreno, 2020). Studies adopting psychoanalytic and identity-based perspectives frame the monster as a split subject, whose self-consciousness gradually develops through language, observation, desire, and the process of being excluded from the symbolic community (see Sherwin, 1981; Johnson, 1982; Collings, 1992; Hogle, 2003). Analyses drawing on political, Gothic, and ideological frameworks, meanwhile, situate the novel within the era's anxieties surrounding modernity, revolution, class, and other related concerns to conduct their examinations (see Sterrenburg, 1979; Moretti, 1982; O'Flinn, 1983; McGann, 1985; Lew, 1991; Randel, 2003; Punter & Byron, 2004, 2016). While the aforementioned body of research covers a wide range of issues,

including science and gender, it fails to unpack the discursive trajectory through which Victor, in his identity as an Enlightenment master, leverages scientific practices legitimized by the university discourse to mold the monster into an idealist hysteric that questions master-signifiers such as rationality. This unaddressed gap is exactly the critical starting point of the present study.

For a long time, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has remained a core text in Western literary criticism. Existing scholarship has produced rich interpretations of the work across multiple dimensions, including scientific narrative, gender politics, the construction of monstrosity, the logic of social exclusion, anxieties of the Romantic era, and the ethics of creation. Yet a critical gap persists in current literature: no study has systematically analyzed how Enlightenment authority is generated through the chain of discursive construction, institutional legitimization, and ideological fantasization, nor how it faces the fundamental challenge posed by the Creature, which acts as a subject that questions this authority. In the novel's main discursive conflict, the creator Victor first appears as an Enlightenment master and a holder of knowledge discourse. The knowledge he controls seems objective and neutral, but in reality, it is always governed by an implicit master signifier. The abandoned Creature, by contrast, acts as a hysterical subject that cannot be silenced and raises a series of fundamental inquiries about his own creation, abandonment, and exclusion, as well as his creator's refusal to take responsibility. This study adopts a Lacanian-Foucauldian cross-theoretical discourse analysis approach, integrating relevant theoretical frameworks to conduct its analysis. The reasons for choosing this theoretical is twofold: (1) It moves from pure socio-cultural to a psychoanalytic dimension and (2) moves from pure linguistic to psycho-linguistic dimension. It ultimately argues that *Frankenstein* is far from merely a cautionary tale about science; rather, it is a core narrative which documents the fall of the Enlightenment master, and exposes that knowledge disconnected from responsibility can only produce trauma of articulation within the symbolic order.

2. The Generation of Discourse by the Other

Like the many other philosophical concepts, discourse did not emerge as an original concept to belong only to one specific thinker. The concept of discourse, the present authors contend, undisputedly originates in the philosophy of Georg W. F. Hegel, the father of dialectics. Plato's (1992) dialectical method shows how truth originates from a rational, philosophical dialogue and contradiction (p. 437b), Aristotle's (1984), concepts of potentiality and actuality pave the way for understanding the dialectical unfolding (p. 431a, 1065b), Baruch Spinoza believes that reality structures a unified totality, useful in understanding Hegel's Absolute Spirit (1996, pp. 22, 43), Immanuel Kant (1998), explains how human mind structures reality through the mediation of human understanding and separates phenomenon from noumenon (pp. A235–60, B294–315), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1997) maintains that human identity is structured socially and politically (pp. 45–46), Johann G. Fichte (1982) affirms the necessity of a non-ego, a not-itself, or an-other-ego in the construction of the self (pp. 93–94), Friedrich W. J. Schelling (1978), a close friend of Hegel, highlights the unity of Nature and Spirit to shed light on the dynamic and dialectical nature of reality (pp. 41–42), and Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, meticulously illustrates that self-consciousness is only possible through recognition by another consciousness.

Hegel (1977) asserts that “[s]elf-consciousness is *in* and *for itself* while and as a result of its being in and for itself for an other” (p. 108). This Hegelian synthesis of previous philosophies explains how subjectivity is constructed through identification and recognition of a dominant other in any given society which exists based on the laws of possibility and probability. Two questions are crucial for the theoretical foundations of this research: What is the difference between the [Lacanian] Other, [Foucauldian] discourse, and ideology? How do they function in relation to human subjectivity? Answering these questions eventually pave the way for

answering the main research question of this study: how does Frankenstein represent the rise of Enlightenment/Master subject and its fall by the Romantic/Hysteric subject?

The master/slave dialectic of Hegel cannot be overlooked when it comes to discussions of the Other, discourse, and ideology, for he haunts most of the thinkers who succeed him. With Sigmund Freud (1961), it has become more or less clear that the ego recognizes and identifies with the “object-cathexes,” the process of investing psychic energies in external objects (you may also refer to the notion of Partial Objects in the studies of Melanie Klein and Object *Petite a* in the philosophy of Jacques Lacan) (pp. 119–120). Martin Heidegger and Alexandre Kojève are influential in understanding the concepts of discourse and the Other (in the case of Emmanuel Levinas, who has a different agency, in his *Totality and Infinity*, the other is associated with otherness and other human presence).

Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* should be understood from three interrelated dimensions: Existential Crisis, Temporal Projection, and Discourse. In his *Time and Being*, he asserts that to be is essentially to be in a world which is already there, ahead of you, forcing you to throw yourself into existence, to fill a gap or lack which is inherent in your being by the virtue of the lack-in-being (Jean-Paul Sartre later elaborates on this notion in his discussions of being-in-itself and being-for-itself in his *Being and Nothingness*). The subject then projects him/herself into the future, for being is basically being through time, and presence is essentially being-present-there, somewhere else, and beyond the metaphysical presence (Jacques Derrida later develops this concept in his *Of Grammatology*, asserting the necessity of *Différance* and *Supplement*). The subject finally recognizes the surroundings, which s/he is forced to identify with one way or another (Later, Michel Foucault elaborates on this in his works). The final dimension of *Dasein* is essentially referring to discourse, a governing system of epistemes distributed by the various institutions of a society. What makes discourse different from the Other can be inferred from Kojève’s (1980), emphasis on “the desire of another.” He believes that,

to desire the Desire of another is in the final analysis to desire that the value that I am or that I “represent” be the value desired by the other: I want him to “recognize” my value as his value. I want him to “recognize” as an autonomous value. In other words, all human, anthropogenetic Desire ... the desire for “recognition.” (p. 7)

These notions heavily influenced Lacan’s formulation of the Other as the *Symbolic Core* of cultures (Claude Lévi-Strauss originally highlighted the significance of symbolic relations in society in his *Structural Anthropology*). The Other is different from discourse because it has its own institutions, the present authors maintain, and it is by effect the *Patriarchal Institution*. Lacan (1993) affirms that the “so-called internal monologue is entirely continuous with the external dialogue, and indeed this is why we can say that the unconscious is also the discourse of the Other” (p. 112). Discourse is thus a mere small other within the Other. What makes the Other and discourse different from ideology is a matter of hierarchy and function within the symbolic order. The present authors have a different formulation for ideology, or, as they prefer to call it, *ideological function*.

Louis Althusser (originally influenced by Karl Marx’s concept of ideology) asserts that “ideology” functions “in the material forms of existence” (Althusser, 1971, p. 171), like when you have the pictures of your favourite leader or philosopher attached to your wall at home. He also argues that “individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects” (p. 176). The closer one dives into his discussions of ideology, the clearer it becomes that he is explaining a *function*, an ideological function, not a system of ideas. It is a function through which a discourse or a set of discursive epistemes are naturalized, normalized, *fantasized*, and

ideologized. To understand the ideological function more clearly, the role of fantasy should be explained in greater detail.

Slavoj Žižek (1989), under the influence of Lacan, elaborates on the function of fantasy. In his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, he illustrates that “[i]deology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel” (p. 45). Fantasy is a function he attributes to ideology, forming “an imagined scenario representing the realization of desire” (Žižek, 1989, p. 132). Once again, ideology is only explained as how it functions, and it is essentially a fantasizing function by which subjects’ desires are initially regulated and then realized, such as when directors contemplate the best point of view, and that is why “fantasy is the *mise-en-scene* of desire” (Homer, 2004, p. 126). In a study, Shenavi and Bassir (2025) mention hierarchical stages for the subject’s entanglement. They believe that the subject is “interpellated by ideologies, regulated by discourses, and subjectified by the Other” (p. 231). The perspective is of importance in this research: the Other gives birth to subjects, its discourse regulates them, and the ideological-fantasizing function chain them into realized symbolic relations.

3. Discourse, Power, and the Construction of Truth

In the poststructuralist era, language is not a neutral faculty or competence inherent in the human psyche; nevertheless, it is more alive than the subject. Foucault, Lacan, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and many other poststructuralist thinkers believe in what Heidegger (1962) calls “the house of Being,” which is language (p. 239). In this sense, language becomes the medium through which subjects are born. It is not the subject who speaks through language, but it is language which speaks through us (Lacan, 2006, p. 578). Since language is limited to words in its common function, the present authors prefer the term “signification system,” since it designates a system involving all forms of symbolic-semiotic signification. Discourse operates in the realm of signification in its own unique way, as illustrated later. Foucault’s journey into the epistemology of power-knowledge relations begins with archeology and moves toward genealogy. Similarly, this theoretical foundation benefits from these foundational categories.

In his *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1972) conceptualizes discourse as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this *more* that renders them irreducible to the language (*langue*) and to speech. It is this ‘more’ that we must reveal and describe” (p. 54). Discourse is no longer a set of signs referring to objects which are presupposed to possess preexisting essences with regard to discourse; however, it is discourse which defines the essences of all objects within the *socius*. It defines what is legitimate and illegitimate; what is included and excluded, and what is truth and untruth. “Truth is a thing of this world ... [each] society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). Since “power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations,” truth becomes institutional, inseparable from social structures of power and authority (Foucault, 1995, p. 27).

4. The Birth and Distribution of Epistemes

Archeology refers to the stages through which knowledge (and eventually discourse) is produced, dealing with the dominant epistemes of each period. Foucault warns his readers to keep in mind that he is not concerned with the linear “progress of knowledge,” but he attempts

to bring to light the “epistemological field, the episteme in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or to its objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility” (Foucault, 2005, pp. XXIII–XXIV). In other words, the episteme refers to that which determines what may ultimately be counted as truth, knowledge, and rationality during a specific era. Archeology also reveals discontinuities within various historical periods, “the fact that within the space of a few years a culture sometimes ceases to think as it had been thinking up till then and begins to think other things in a new way,” such as the movement from the Enlightenment to Romanticism (Foucault, 1977, p. 56). While archeology deals with the non-linear structures of epistemes in each period, genealogy elaborates on the production of subjects.

Genealogy is concerned with the emergence of subjectivities, identities, and power dynamics. As Foucault (1977) asserts in his “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” “[g]enealogy ... seeks to reestablish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations” (p. 148). Genealogy also seeks to reveal the operations of power relations with regard to surveillance, sovereignty, institutions, normalization, and legitimacy. The task of genealogy “is [thus] to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body” (Foucault, 1977, p. 148). Moreover, its role is to

record *its* history: the history of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts, the history of the concept of liberty or of the ascetic life; as they stand for the emergence of different interpretations, they must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process. (Foucault, 1977, p. 52)

Genealogy sheds light on the postcolonial view concerning the discursive nature of subjectivity. With genealogy, subjects are not approached as fixed, natural, universal, and preexisting stereotypes; on the contrary, they are analyzed as productions, historically constructed by various institutions. That is why, from this landmark, Foucault (1977), explains that “if genealogy in its own right gives rise to questions concerning our native land, native language, or the laws that govern us, its intention is to reveal the heterogenous systems which, masked by the self, inhibit the formation of any form of identity” (p. 162). To understand how discourses become authoritative for the subject, Norman Fairclough’s views on the relation between discourse and ideology provide rich directions and perspectives.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), theorized and formulated by Fairclough, is a critical approach originally used in linguistic studies, uncovering the complex connections between discourse, ideology, and social power. This theory rejects formalism, which views language as an autonomous system separated from social reality. Fairclough’s theories and notions define discourse as a social practice which is both shaped by social structures and in turn constructs social structures. CDA goes far beyond merely describing linguistic forms; it also seeks to explain how discourse participates in the production, maintenance, and transformation of social power relations. In his work *Language and Power*, Fairclough (1989) explicitly states that a critical study of language should “help correct a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power” (p. 1). CDA thus overturns the widespread traditional view that language is a transparent, passive medium which reflects reality, and argues that language is one of the primary mechanisms for constructing the legitimacy of social systems, reproducing authority, and securing ideological recognition.

The concern of Fairclough’s discourse theory is the ideological nature of discourse. This ideological dimension does not operate solely on the basis of explicit political doctrines and

belief systems; instead, it is embedded in the implicit presuppositions of everyday language. This theoretical framing has revised the public's understanding of discourse's ideological attribute, widely known as "ideological discourses," when a discourse is ideologized to function based on the rules of fantasy, creating the illusion of reality (refer to "The Generation of Discourse by the Other" section in this paper). Fairclough (1989, p. 2) understands that "such assumptions are ideologies" because they function as "a means of legitimizing existing social relations and differences of power" through ordinary forms of discourse that present historically contingent relations as self-evident and natural (see also Fairclough, 1992, and Fairclough, 1995). In this view, ideology is once again referred to as a function, for "idéā" (ιδέα) essentially refers to "form" and "pattern." It is almost precisely in this sense that *ideology* should be defined as *a specific pattern, form, or mode of representation tied to the Symbolic of the subject through fantasy*. It represents epistemes, discursive statements, and languages which are not neutral but normalized as part of social reality.

5. The Lacanian Subject and Four Psycho-Linguistic Discourses

Lacan's psycholinguistic theory is known for its anti-Cartesianism, for it radically rejects the view of an autonomous, logical subject who is endowed with the power of reason. Lacan's view on the genesis of the subject includes four main stages: the Pre-Oedipal, the Mirror, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The preoedipal stage designates a crucial moment in the development of the male child before the oedipal stage. This stage is mostly about the male child and not "female" in this case, since female is always-already a male-castrated, a [fe]male ("fe" in Proto-Indo-European roots meaning "to breastfeed," a male with breasts and without a phallus). The female castration and her oedipal phase are thus totally different from the male. The male child senses a lack in the mother (while the female child thinks the mother has castrated her), the intervention of a third party in their illusory dual relation is the phallus (Lacan, 2020, pp. 82, 193). The preoedipal stage is thus essentially a short unity with the mother, a preoedipal heaven, before the alienation caused by the intervention of the phallus (pp. 223–224, 226).

This intervention of the phallus, in the opinion of the present authors, simultaneously initiates the mirror stage, a phase in which the ideal ego (illusory ego) is constructed through recognition of and identification with the specular image, the [small] other, usually between six and eighteen months (Lacan, 2006, p. 5; Lacan, 2020, p. 17). At this moment, the child is thrown into the Imaginary order and the Oedipal complex by virtue of an alienation (Lacan, 1993, p. 146). When the child recognizes his inability to satisfy the desire of the mother in the Oedipal complex, he confronts the real phallus, which is possessed by the father (symbolically, and not always literally), and is alienated once more from the mother (Lacan, 2020, pp. 208–209, 227). This process brings the subject into the realm of the Symbolic: the recognition of and identification with the Name-of-the-Father, language, society, culture, and the Other, which gives birth to the ego ideal (Homer, 2004, p. 44; Lacan, 1988, p. 141; Lacan, 2006, p. 132; Lacan, 2020, p. 189). There is also a third order, the Real, which is essentially unattainable, though from time to time it transgresses into the Symbolic, like a moment of *jouissance*, only to restore lack into being (Lacan, 1988, p. 66; Lacan, 1998, p. 167; Lacan, 2006, p. 388). Building on the inferences laid out in the preceding discussion, Lacanian subjectivity emerges from the dynamic interconnections among the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, while the Other serves as the necessary core domain that underpins identity, desire, and social existence.

The logic of the reconstruction of psychoanalytic linguistics, Lacan's reworking of structural linguistics centers on the proposition of the primacy of the signifier. Meaning does not originate from the subject's conscious intentions; instead, it emerges from the differential relationships between different signifiers within the Symbolic Order. Subjectivity itself is merely a product of signification, not an inherent precondition which exists prior to discourse (Lacan, 2007, p.

13). Lacan successively articulated two major claims: the subject is by no means the origin of discourse but rather a product of discourse's operation; the unconscious follows the structural logic of language and is in essence "the discourse of the Other" (1998, pp. 131, 203). These claims overturn the view of the autonomous self in traditional humanism and further point out that desire, repression, and subjectivity are, without exception, mediated by discourse. There is no direct biological origin which exists independent of the symbolic system (or signification system). This theory of the signifier both explains the internal mechanism through which discourse constructs subjectivity, and clarifies that a complete closed symbolic loop is fundamentally unachievable.

Lacan's (1999) theory of the four discourses broke through the original research boundaries of traditional psychoanalysis, which was limited to individual psychology, extending psychoanalysis's main insights to the analytical scope of social relations, authority, and institutional structures (p. 21). Lacan (2007) systematically proposed that discourse is defined as a fundamental relation which organizes social existence and operates independently of actual speech, far from being merely a tool for interpersonal communication (p. 13). The four discourses are generated by the arrangement and combination of four principal elements: the master signifier S1, knowledge S2, the barred subject \$, and the object-cause of desire objet petit *a*. They are respectively the master's discourse, the university discourse, the hysterical discourse, and the analyst's discourse: the master's discourse establishes symbolic authority through the commands of the master signifier (p. 118); the university discourse transforms authority into institutionalized knowledge and bureaucratic rationality and "shows what guarantees the discourse of science" (p. 104); the hysterical discourse questions authority from the position of the barred subject to drive knowledge production (pp. 23, 35); the analyst's discourse uncovers the truth of unconscious desire hidden beneath symbolic identification (p. 41). This theory is a psychoanalytical tool for studying social bonds themselves. Its contribution is confirming that power and knowledge can never be separated from desire and symbolic structure and that social relations are simultaneously governed by two sets of forces: institutional power and unconscious investments which can sustain, challenge, or transform symbolic authority.

6. *Frankenstein* and the Spirit of the Time: From 1780s to 1820s

Frankenstein emerged at the historical crossroads where Enlightenment rationalism, revolutionary politics, industrial transformation, and Romantic skepticism converged, with the text's structure centered on a set of diverse, contested discourses surrounding human nature, knowledge, and social progress. Drawing on foundational studies of the Enlightenment, 18th-century Enlightenment currents shaped European intellectual life (see Robertson, 2020; Gay, 1995). Enlightenment thinkers upheld beliefs in reason, empirical inquiry, and human perfectibility, arguing that scientific knowledge could free humanity from ignorance and superstition and advance civilizational progress. The novel's protagonist Victor is the concrete embodiment of Enlightenment values: his relentless pursuit of scientific control and drive to uncover nature's hidden secrets align with the promise of the Enlightenment, that rational inquiry expands human power (see Israel, 2001). Yet Mary Shelley simultaneously interrogates this set of Enlightenment ideals, exposing the ethical blind spots of scientific ambition severed from social responsibility. Rooted in the anti-Enlightenment critical premises laid out by Isaiah Berlin in *Against the Current* and *The Roots of Romanticism*, the novel does not uncritically align with either side. However, it constructs a site of discursive conflict between the Enlightenment's belief in progress and Romantic anxieties over the destructive potential of unconstrained reason.

The ideological tension embodied in *Frankenstein* is inextricably linked to the profound social transformations that unfolded across Britain and Europe from the late 18th century to the early 19th century. In the field of historical studies, E.P. Thompson, in his *The Making of the English Working Class* (1966), argued that industrialization and capitalist social relations fundamentally restructured traditional forms of community, labor, and identity, giving rise to entirely new experiences of exclusion and alienation. In his *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848* (1996), Eric Hobsbawm pointed out that the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution triggered unprecedented social upheaval across the European continent, reshaping European political consciousness and social organization. In his *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1990), Roy Porter similarly noted that during this period, the relationships between class, religion, education, and authority were in constant flux, and the tensions generated by these shifts permeated the literature and political thought of the same era. The current research thus interprets the monster in the text as the symbolic embodiment of social marginalization. Its experiences of being rejected by family, law, education, and community reflect the widespread era-specific anxiety sparked by the fates of individuals cast out by modern social structures. The monster's longing for companionship and acceptance is far from a mere personal tragedy; rather, it is a universal sociological proposition concerning belonging, recognition, and the costs of social exclusion. For these reasons, *Frankenstein* stands as a powerful text which critiques the human cost of Enlightenment and modernization and the inherent contradictions of emerging social organizations.

The present research further argues that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* deeply engages with the Romantic movement's critique and reconstruction of the core Enlightenment concepts of knowledge, power, and subjectivity. This paper builds its analytical framework around the position Jerome McGann advances in his *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (1985). He contends that Romantic literature is a response to concrete ideological and historical conditions, rather than a work of pure transcendent imagination to interpret Shelley's intervention in the contemporary debates over science, authority, and social responsibility. In her *The Lunar Men: The Friends Who Made the Future, 1730–1810* (2002), Jenny Uglow points out that the activities of inventors, natural philosophers, and industrial reformers of that era gave rise to widespread societal confidence in technological progress; Fulford et al., in *Literature, Science and Exploration in the Romantic Era: Bodies of Knowledge* (2004), add that in this context, knowledge became deeply intertwined with the power to conquer nature. The protagonist Frankenstein's project aligns with this cultural demand, yet its catastrophic outcomes expose the hidden contradictions inherent in this ideological trend. Drawing on Anne Mellor's argument in her *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (1988) that Shelley consistently challenged the unethical patriarchal authority of science, this present study posits that *Frankenstein* constitutes a complex discursive site where Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment perspectives collide and are reconstructed. The novel is neither anti-science nor an advocacy for irrationality; instead, it calls for a balance between intellectual ambition and ethical responsibility, and it concretizes the core ideological tensions of the Romantic era.

7. Master Frankenstein and His Knowledge Discourse

The current paper draws on the framework of the master's discourse proposed by Lacan: the master signifier S1 (in the master's discourse), which occupies the position of authority, governs the knowledge signifier S2 (in the university discourse), and constructs a stable social reality by concealing its own incompleteness (for the barred subject \$). The discourse of university is dominated by knowledge authority, which frames scientific inquiry as the path to obtain truth. This claim is corroborated by the protagonist Victor's educational experience under the tutelage of Waldman. In Enlightenment discourse, reason, science, progress, and mastery all serve as the aforementioned master signifier. Victor, the protagonist of *Frankenstein*, repeatedly casts

himself as an Enlightenment master, attempting to unlock nature's secrets, push the boundaries of human capability, and become the supreme source of knowledge. A Foucauldian analysis illuminates this Lacanian psycholinguistic view.

For Foucault, an episteme designates what is to be determined, regarded, and accepted as knowledge in a particular historical period. This is followed by an act of normalization, legitimizing a set of institutionalized discourses along with their dominant statements, while others are excluded from the domain of truth as insignificant discourses or narratives. In *Frankenstein*, the rise of modern science and death of alchemy are no coincidence; nevertheless, it represents a discursive rupture, moving from traditional views toward the Enlightenment. This project of Enlightenment, which initially promised progress through rationality, observation, and empiricism, turns out to be none but a new myth, rendering and reducing all phenomena into calculable, measurable, and manageable objects found in the laboratory of the positivists (see *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002) by Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer). This is forcefully referenced to in the novel, making it a literary manifesto against the failure of Enlightenment illusion.

The epistemological rupture from old worldviews into the Enlightenment is best represented by Victor. When Mr. Krempe censures Victor, saying that "every instant that you have wasted on those books is utterly and entirely lost. You have burdened your memory with exploded systems and useless names" (Shelley, 2012, p. 43). This is the beginning of rupture, moving from alchemy toward the Enlightenment science. Mr. Krempe's position is authoritative, institutional, and dictates the epistemes of the day, rendering alchemy a "useless" and "exploded" system. On another occasion, Victor rethinks his position under the influence of the epistemes of the day, taking steps in accordance with the acceptable discursive statements. He thinks, "I had retraced the steps of knowledge along the paths of time and exchanged the discoveries of recent inquirers for the dreams of forgotten alchemists" (p. 44). He replaces the old knowledge with the new knowledge, no longer following the "dreams of forgotten alchemists" but the new "inquirers."

The emergence of the Enlightenment episteme is further represented through the position of Mr. Waldman, who describes the modern science like passing a manifesto for the Enlightenment project. He says that "the modern masters promise very little ... but these philosophers ... have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding-places" (Shelley, 2012, p. 45). Other than the obvious lexical markers of the discourse of the Enlightenment, such as "nature" as it is known in its (neo)classical version, the statement states the emergence of a new episteme, founded on the discoveries and views of new "philosophers" who do "miracles," most probably philosophers such as Francis Bacon, John Locke, and David Hume.

The new scientists and philosophers brought new knowledge and new epistemes, leaving behind the old and celebrating the new. This how a new "regime of truth" is born to dismantle the traditional views. When Victor was a child, he collects a book to read, and his father immediately asserted, "Ah! Cornelius Agrippa! My dear Victor, do not waste your time upon this; it is sad trash" (Shelley, 2012, p. 36). His father is an agent of the new epistemes, distinguishing what is to be recognized as acceptable knowledge and unacceptable knowledge. Victor later becomes an agent of the new epistemes and their legitimate discourses, disciplining himself to conform with the discursive statements. He remembers that he "at once gave up [his] former occupations, set down natural history and all its progeny as deformed and abortive creation, and entertained the greatest disdain for a would-be science" (p. 38). This is an instance of internalizing the current discourse by rejecting the old.

This legitimacy is further intensified by the comments of Mr. Waldman. On another occasion, he rejoices the emergence of chemistry, emphasizing that “chemistry is that branch of natural philosophy in which the greatest improvements have been and may be made ... if your wish is to become really a man of science” (Shelley, 2012, p. 46). The regime of truth requires a practice of chemistry from he who wishes “to become really a man of science” (regarding the fact that females were deprived of such practices during that period, the phrasing is male-inclined and not biased). In this sense, validity is based on conformity with the new epistemes and their discourse and practicing their discursive statements.

Victor internalizes this new scientific discourse of the Enlightenment, saying that “so much has been done ... more, far more, I will achieve; treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation” (Shelley, 2012, p. 45). But the case is no longer what the Enlightenment has promised. Victor wants to be part of the new system but simultaneously seeks power beyond the limits of the Symbolic realm, for those who seek power will dictate it only if they possess the power to transgress it (Homer, 2004, pp. 57–59). He affirms with pride that the scientists “have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of the heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows” (Shelley, 2012, p. 45).

It does not end with this vanity, but the case gets even worse when he exceeds the limits totally, claiming that “the sun does not more certainly shine in the heavens than that which I now affirm is true ... I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life” (Shelley, 2012, p. 50). This is where the Symbolic is transgressed into a realm of excess, of beyond, not to transcend, however, as it is explained later, to fail epistemologically. He becomes the master, dictating the law of the master signifier; nevertheless, he fails in sustaining the discursive position and practice. The novel, however, not only demonstrates the failure of the Enlightenment project but also warns the readers against dogmatism through extreme positivism. Though Victor is one of the victims of the vanities of the Enlightenment period, he also, in an intersubjective manner, warns Walton and notes that “[you should] learn from me ... how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow” (p. 51). This exactly where the master understands his simultaneous position as a slave, for one is more inclined to perform in accordance with discourses when s/he is given an advantageous position of master while being a slave to the system. Before discussing the failure of master’s discourse and his new knowledge discourse, it is essential to understand how discourses become dominant and legitimate for (barred) subjects.

As Foucault (1972) states, “discourse is constituted by a group of signs, in so far as they are statements, that is, in so far as they can assigned particular modalities of existence” (p. 121), and “we must be ready to receive every moment of discourse in its sudden irruption; in that punctuality which it appears ... to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased, and hidden” (p. 28). The discursive statements in the novel shed light on a state in which these repetitions and punctualities are no longer neutral, but constitutive of a discourse intertwined with social realities within the novel as well as the period in which it was written. These discourses come onto the stage of reality through the ideological function. While Fairclough (1992) would argue that they operate as ideology and Žižek would contend it happens by the medium of fantasy, the present paper would claim that it operates ideologically, as an ideological function, as an ideological discourse (pp. 72–73; 1989, p. 45). However, the rigid scientific discourse of Enlightenment is challenged when the Creature of Victor Frankenstein comes onto the stage. As a novel written in the late-Romantic era of the early nineteenth century, it is essentially an anti-Enlightenment novel. Nevertheless, the results of the analysis predict the existence of a dominant discourse, the Enlightenment scientific discourse. In the next and final

analytical section, it is demonstrated how this Enlightenment (or knowledge) discourse is only highlighted to be dismantled by the discourse of the hysteric, the Creature of master Frankenstein.

8. The Discourse of the Hysteric: The Creature Interrogates the Master

In Lacan's system of discourses, the main condition which triggers a shift from university discourse to hysterical discourse is the collapse of the self-evidence of intellectual authority, which turns it into an object of questioning. The split or barred subject (\$) at the heart of the system, as an acting agent, presses the master signifier (S1) to provide answers about its own existence, identity, and inherent lack. When applied to the literary text, the master and creator Victor is a typical participant in university discourse. The monster is both a product of this discourse, and a quintessential hysterical subject which acts as the discourse's most profound challenger. The monster's questioning escalates from "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" to "everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded" (Shelley, 2012, p. 98). Victor attempts to act as the master who creates life but refuses to fulfill the corresponding ethical obligations. The monster's hysterical discourse precisely puts an impossible demand on that authority: it demands the master explain the inherent contradictions at the heart of its own authority. In the end, the monster's confrontation erodes Victor's scientific legitimacy, as well as the Enlightenment presuppositions which underpin that legitimacy.

The Creature's continuous pursuit of recognition and meaning highlights the hysterical nature of his discourse, which in turn anchors the work's main conflict: the creator Victor adheres to the Enlightenment-era belief that knowledge can fully control reality, but the Creature's first-hand lived experience directly overturns this premise. The Creature once secretly observed the De Lacey family, teaching himself human social knowledge, including language, literature, and history, yet he was never able to enter the social symbolic order to obtain a legitimate identity. His discourse thus transformed into a constant interrogation of social and moral authority. When the Creature asks,

Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and abhorred. (Shelley, 2012, p. 130)

This exposes the gap between scientific creation and ethical responsibility. The hysteric interrogates the master to produce knowledge but never receives a sufficient response. This framework confirms that the Creature's suffering is by no means rooted in ignorance, but rather in his inability to obtain a satisfactory answer from the authority he questions. His demands for companionship, justice, and recognition reveal the flaw of Enlightenment rationality, which fails to account for the emotional and social dimensions of existence. Through this process, the Creature completes a transformation from a passive experimental object to an active (non-classical-romantic) subject who challenges the ideological foundation of the discursive system which shapes him. To understand how this realized discourse of master is challenged ideologically, or how its function is carried by the Creature, the ideological function and fantasy are also the mediators of the hysteric discourse.

The Žižekian psychoanalytic approach demonstrates the methods through which the Creature deconstructs the ideology of Enlightenment science, and positions itself (or himself) as the major symbolic figure which exposes the inherent failure of the ideological fantasy of

scientific mastery. Victor's experiment relies on the fantasy premise that full command of all knowledge grants control over life itself; the Creature is the concrete embodiment of the contradictions this fantasy attempts to suppress and the surplus product, which the university discourse cannot integrate into its own system. The Creature repeatedly forces Victor to confront the consequences of his actions and acknowledge the limits of scientific authority. On the wedding night, the Creature declares that "It is well. I go; but remember, I shall be with you on your wedding-night" (Shelley, 2012, p. 167). Its declaration on Victor's wedding night is not merely a threat, but the return of the repressed truth. This paper introduces a contrast between Lacan's two discourses: the master's and university discourse attempt to stabilize reality through knowledge, while the hysteric's discourse exposes the instability of knowledge by raising questions which can never be fully answered. On this basis, the paper positions the Creature as the novel's hysteric subject, dismantles the self-consistency promised by Enlightenment science, and clarifies that the novel completes a thematic shift from celebrating Enlightenment knowledge to interrogating its ethical, psychological, and ideological consequences.

9. Conclusion

This paper's interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* transcends the limitations of common strains of prior research: mainstream existing interpretations either categorize the work as a classic Gothic horror text, frame it as a personal tragedy of a romantic genius' downfall, or reduce it to a generalized warning case for science and technology ethics. None of these approaches engage with the deep logic of discursive power underlying the text. This study introduces Foucault's mechanism of truth and power and Lacan's theory of discursive structure to argue that the novel is essentially a complete discursive drama documenting the rise and fall of Enlightenment episteme and its discourse. First, this paper traces how protagonist Victor Frankenstein completes the identity construction of an Enlightenment master by accumulating scientific knowledge. Next, drawing on the dual theoretical framework, it unpacks the operational path through which his discursive practice secures legitimacy via specialized professional knowledge. It then analyzes how the Creature shifts from a suppressed object to a subject that articulates its own voice, completely subverting the entire discursive structure which underpins Enlightenment power. Finally, the study advances a critique of the modern ideological fantasy that knowledge can secure its discursive practice without paying ethical costs and systematically lays out the narrative arc of Enlightenment power from its emergence and expansion to its collapse.

This study thus integrates Foucault's discourse theory, Lacan's theory of discourse, Žižek's concept of ideology and fantasy, and the ideological-fantasy function and employs an interdisciplinary theoretical method to analyze the discursive logic and Enlightenment critique in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The findings demonstrate that the novel does not only dramatize the dangers of scientific overreach, but exposes the total collapse of the entire symbolic structure built upon the fantasy of absolute knowledge. As the study's major research subject, the protagonist Victor is a typical Enlightenment master, marked by three layers of internal fragmentation: he seeks to control nature yet is ultimately dominated by scientific discourse; he aims to take charge of the origin of life yet is powerless to manage all consequences of his creation; he declares himself a creator yet can only recognize his true self through the accusations levied by his own creation. At the institutional level, the university discourse presented in the text claims to produce neutral knowledge, but it is in fact always governed by implicit master signifiers: rationality, progress, truth, and the assumption of human superiority over nature. The Creature's hysterical discourse, meanwhile, is the text's most radical force of resistance. It opposes not only Victor but also forces all holders of the master position to confront the inherent emptiness of their master identity. This Creature, which

consistently upholds justice, recognition, companionship, and moral reciprocity, is denied any place in the symbolic order, leading its idealism to eventually turn into an unbearable burden. The current study thus contributes to understanding the narrative beyond the long-standing misinterpretations: Shelley's work is not simply anti-science; rather, it critiques knowledge cut off from responsibility, ethics, and the needs of the social-symbolic order. *Frankenstein* serves as a literary arena which pushes the critique of the Enlightenment's master fantasy from mere questioning to structural dismantling. The fall of the master never occurs because knowledge fails to create life; it occurs because the created life gains the ability to speak, like a free unbound romantic subject.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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