

# Homophobia and the Queered Gothic in Frankenstein

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## ABSTRACT

This essay aims to demonstrate a gothic queer reading of Frankenstein, and the homophobia of both the main character Victor Frankenstein and the society as a whole, and the psychological changes of the protagonist are analyzed in combination with social science theory. In Frankenstein, “queer” would be defined as behaviors or desires that transcend heteronormativity; the “queered gothic” refers to altering or undermining queerness with the appearances of gothic elements. Frankenstein’s homosexual desires were forced to reveal in the creation of the monster, who facing exclusion from the heterosexual world after running out. Finally their mutual destruction symbolized death sentence of sodomy during the period.

**Keywords:** *Homophobia, Gothicism, Frankenstein, Sociology, Gender Studies*

## 1. HETEROSEXUALITY AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Before creating the monster, Victor Frankenstein had implicitly exhibited an unconscious inclination to homosexuality. In the first few chapters, Frankenstein was depicted as a scholar who obsessively pursued natural philosophy. Leaving home to the university of Ingolstadt, he was guided to study modern science, took it as nearly his “sole occupation” and “read with ardour those works” (Shelley 46). In university his friend Henry Clerval had accompanied him. Clerval, described as “a boy of singular talent and fancy”(31), is on par with Frankenstein in intelligence. As a consequence, Frankenstein and Clerval shared much intimacy—Frankenstein had only revealed his secret of creating the monster to Clerval, he recovered from the fever under Clerval’s nursing, and later when he embarked to Europe, he took Clerval with him. Elizabeth, however, did not have much interaction with Frankenstein since he left for university. Growing up together, Frankenstein and Elizabeth’s marriage was determined. Frankenstein’s mother had claimed that her “The strongest hope for future happiness lies in your (their) union”, and that their union would also be the “consolation of your [their] father”(39). The fact that their marriage was prearranged and that they were cousins contributed to the lack of sexual tension and intimacy between them. Though expressing much of his missing and concern of Elizabeth, Frankenstein did not exhibit sexual desires for Elizabeth, nor did he suggest to push forward their relationship. They still remained distant and separated most of the time. This had worried Elizabeth—in her letter she questioned Frankenstein, “Do you love another?”, suggesting that she had sensed a lack of love from Frankenstein, other than the normal “brother and sister”(231) affection [1].

## 2. CONSCIOUSNESS AND SUBCONSCIOUS

The explanation of Frankenstein’s tendency to have a male companion instead of a female one could also be explained by Frankenstein’s negative experiences with female. His early experience with women was unpleasant as he witnessed the death of his mother. The event left Frankenstein with trauma, he felt a “void”, a “despair” towards the “irreparable evil” (39). It made Frankenstein link female figures to death and dissociation, which could be seen in Frankenstein’s dream after he had created the monster. He dreamt of Elizabeth, but in the shadow of death her mouth darkened, and she became the body of my (his) dead mother. In the dream Frankenstein wished to be intimate with Elizabeth, to kiss her, but their closeness soon became a symbol of death. According to Freud<sup>2</sup>, the contents of dreams are repressed but true subconscious desires that represent childhood trauma and contain strong hostility (Freud: 267). It showed that Frankenstein, subconsciously, repelled the existence of female [2].

According to Freud, subconscious is composed of human’s original instinctive motivation dominated by sexual desire, which is not allowed by social morality, law and religion, and is often rejected by the field of consciousness; dreams, faults and neuropathy are all the activities of unconscious instinctive desire. Freud thought that “dream is a kind of fulfillment that can’t be realized in reality and can’t be satisfied by repressed wishes”. Most of these unfulfilled and repressed wishes are related to “sex”. Dream is a kind of subconscious activity. Because people’s psychological defense mechanism suppresses the ID wish, they are not directly expressed in the dream, but appear in the form of distortion into symbol, so dreams are all symbolic. The function of dream is sleep, but it is caused by two

conflicting tendencies: one is to keep the sleep stable; the other is to satisfy the psychological stimulation. In the sense of description, the subconscious can be divided into pre consciousness and subconscious. The difference between them is whether they can be made conscious in the usual way. Pre consciousness is closer to consciousness than subconscious. However, in the sense of dynamics, there is only one subconscious [3].

As shown in FIG.1 and FIG.2, If we compare personality to an iceberg on the sea, the one above the water surface is consciousness, the one floating up and down the water surface is pre consciousness, and the one below the water surface is unconsciousness. The pre consciousness can occasionally appear on the water surface through the action of wind and waves, that is to say, enter into consciousness, while the one under the water cannot appear on the water surface, as a human unconsciousness, we can only Through the form of dream, we can prove our existence and the form of existence, so as to express another part of human self in the form of dream. The dream is to present the inner subconscious through condensation, transference and symbol.

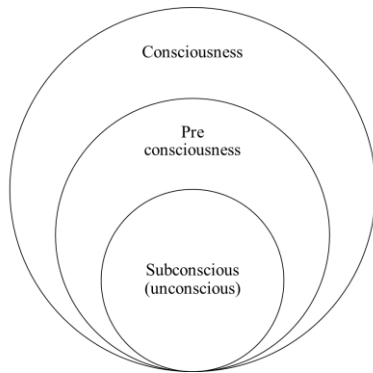


Figure 1. Freud's theory of consciousness level

Resource: Die Traumdeutung

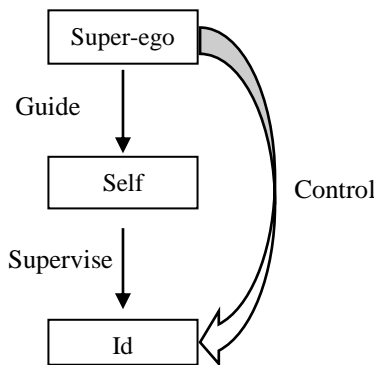


Figure 2. Freud's theory of Personality Structure

Resource: The Ego and the Id

### 3. VIOLATING NATURE AND HETEROGENEOUS NORMS

Frankenstein's attempt to "bestow animation upon lifeless matter" (49) symbolized the destruction of the normality of heterosexuality<sup>3</sup>, because it not only interrupts the cycle of life and death, but also violates the rules of human reproduction. Frankenstein once declared that "in my opinion, life and death are ideal boundaries, and I should first break through them". By creating the monster with corpse, he endowed life to the already dead objects, which was against the functioning of nature. Heterosexuality is considered a "natural" sexual relationship "based on the seemingly natural attraction between two bodies defined as three dimensions (schilt, Kristen, and laurel 443). So Frankenstein was, in a sense, breaking the heteronormativity by violating nature. More importantly, what Frankenstein did was to create a being by himself. He, alone, captured the power to breed a life, without the combination of a sperm and an egg, and without the presence of a female body to harbor such a life. This more strongly suggests how Frankenstein broke heterosexual assumptions: by solely taking the reproductive functions, he had shown that the job of birth giving did not necessarily have to be conducted by a heterosexual couple, again challenging the naturalness and irreplaceability of heterosexuality [4].

### 4. HOMOPHOBIA AND MASCULINITY

The tragic consequence of Frankenstein's action, however, was implied in the text. Through the setting of the creation process, feelings of horror were conveyed. The author utilized numerous gothic elements to create such an environment. When Frankenstein prepared his materials, he collected them from "the dissecting room and the slaughter-house", and kept his "filthy creation" in a "solitary chamber"(52) in his house. The work was filthy—it was done in isolation and required treatment with corpses. Horror reached its peak in the night when Frankenstein's work was finished. It was "a dreary night" with his "candles nearly burnt out", and the monster came to live with its "dull yellow eye"(55). These elements of dreariness, darkness and the distorted monstrous figure demonstrated the fear in Frankenstein's heart—acting against heteronormativity had frightened him, and would cause severe consequences [5].

The monster who then rose above the ground was a manifestation of Frankenstein homosexual desires, or a force that made Frankenstein realize his homosexual inclinations. Discussed by Elizabeth Goldhammer in her essay, Frankenstein had intended to create a human being and "selected his[the monster's] features as beautiful"(55)— the monster's "attractive means of embodying a gay character as an object of victor's sexual identity and desire" .However, "the beauty of the dream

vanished”(56) suddenly after the creation. In Mair Rigby’s essay she argues that “the concept of paranoia is so intimately connected to the cultural understanding of homosexuality”(Rigby 133), and that Frankenstein here demonstrated paranoid mindsets, that he was suddenly filled with “breathless horror and disgust”(56), implying that his mental state had turned abnormal at this time. Such disordered feelings were evoked when the “eye of the creature opened”(55), recalling to mind “the erotic meaning conveyed in the male gaze”(Rigby 134). Frankenstein’s masculinity<sup>4</sup> was destroyed by such gaze, because traditionally male performed the subject of “gaze”, instead of the object. Being “gazed”, Frankenstein’s subjectivity was deprived—the fright of being controlled and objectified by other men initiated his homophobic complex [6].

With such realization, Frankenstein avoided the monster, in an attempt to avoid witnessing his homosexual desires. The monster, subsequently, left the house and ran out to the human world independently. Though gaining agency, the monster was still a derivative of Frankenstein’s homosexual desire, which was being excluded by social gauge. The monster became an anomaly to the world that functions according to normative rules. Being “grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons”(122), the monster was forced to learn social rules through such violent means, and he realized that he was an outsider, of “miserable deformity”(132). Representing the misery of the homosexual community, the monster was born to possess these “deformed” traits, and lacked the power to alter them. He was domesticated by the “natural” human world, took effort to be accepted by imitating human language and learning human thoughts. However, his effort did not give him a sense of belonging, rather the “increase of knowledge only discovered to me[the monster] more clearly what a wretched outcast I[he] was”(155). This demonstrated the deep-rooted heterosexual society, in which any form of homosexual desires were not allowed to survive. The family that the monster had been watching was similar to the monster in a sense that they were also driven out by social rules—they were exiled due to the violation of law. Therefore the monster seek comfort and possibility to blend in society from this family. But upon seeing his appearances, the family collapsed into “horror and consternation” and “struck me violently with a stick”(160)—even the marginalized beings of the heterosexual world joined with the elimination and exclusion of homosexuals, showing the exclusiveness of the heterosexual society, and the distinct boundary between normative and non-normative sexuality [7].

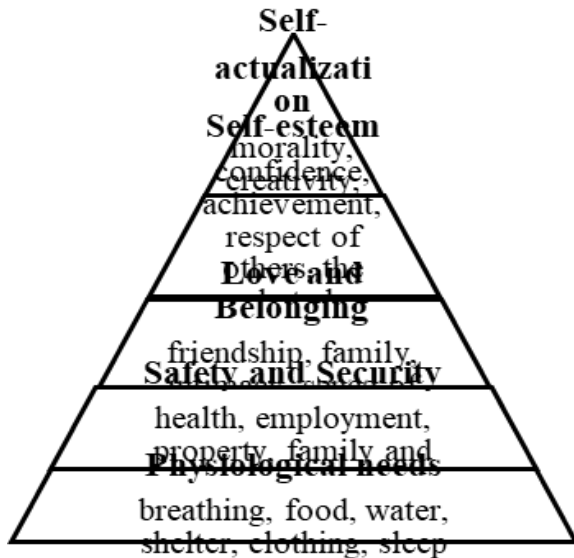
Leaving the family, the monster’s next encounter with human was when he saved a young girl from the rapid stream. However, the father came by and, “seeing me[the monster] draw near”, shot at him. The event represented another characteristic of the treatment of heterosexual world to the homosexual deviants—the accuse that

homosexuality would poison the future generation. Take America’s hysteria against homosexuality in the 1970s for example, the Abolition Movement in Dade County was “save our children” and avoided the so called recruitment of homosexuals. Children were forbidden from accessing homosexual ideals. Adrienne Rich’s notion of “compulsory heterosexuality” maintained that girls and women were educated by the idea of a “preference” or “innate orientation” to heterosexuality (Rich 633). By preventing the monster from getting in touch with the young girl, the man actually prevented the girl from getting in touch with any ideas apart from the “natural” and “inevitable” heterosexuality.

After telling Frankenstein his miserable experiences, the monster brought up his demand, “a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself” (174). The monster’s request demonstrated his wish to establish a separate life outside the human world, in the same way that homosexuals created secret communities to survive out of the heterosexual world. In demanding a companion “of another sex”, the monster showed a willingness to obey heterosexual rules. The monster had realized that the queerness of homosexuality made it unacceptable for homosexuality to fit in the mainstream society, so he compromised, provided a solution that allowed him to establish a small, separated group while submitting to heterosexual powers. Frankenstein, however, went back on his promise and destroyed the female creature. He thought, “had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations?”(204) Frankenstein feared reproduction of the monster. He feared that the existence of a male and female monster would create an offspring, establishing an actual community, and destruct the normal society. Because of Frankenstein’s homophobic complex, he was inclined to picture the queer power as harmful and destructive to heteronormativity, even when his monster had promised not to disturb the human world. Also due to the ubiquity of heterosexuality, another sexual value was not allowed to exist—people believed that heterosexuality had already penetrated the society, that it was the only natural relationship. To maintain rules and normal functioning of the heterosexual world, as well as the heterosexual values in his heart, Frankenstein refused to create another monster [8].

As for revenge, the monster killed Frankenstein’s family and friends. The grandest part of his revenge was the murder of Elizabeth during her wedding night. According to Rigby, marriage had a role in defining the sexually “normal”(Rigby 51). Marriage was a standard that determined what was a natural or normal intimate relationship, by setting up a contract between those who were in such relationship, and denying those who were not. Through the destruction of Frankenstein’s marriage, the monster represented the common belief that homosexuality may overturn such standard, therefore post a threat to heterosexual-dominated world. Moreover, following marriage was the establishment of a family, which marked a large proportion of both one’s life and of the society [9]. Figure 3 details Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory in the field of psychology, Among the five

levels of individual needs, the satisfaction of low-level needs is the premise and basis for the emergence of upper level needs. Domestic values were the collective beliefs of families. By destroying marriage, the monster also destroyed domestic ideals, breaking the peaceful stasis of family. Queer power was being further enlarged, as a significant force to alter normality and introduce dangerous factors to the society.



**Figure 3.** Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Resource: Theory of Human Motivation

At the last part of the book, Frankenstein and the monster engaged in a frantic chase. It was worth noticing that the monster had not killed Frankenstein in the first place, because what the monster wanted was not to gain freedom from Frankenstein, but to torment him, and finally end together with him [10]. The monster seemed to enjoy the chase and enjoy Frankenstein's rage: he was satisfied that Frankenstein "had determined to live", and "often left some marks to guide me[him]" (252) in a fear that Frankenstein would die in despair. Frankenstein, also, was highly motivated to pursue the monster, regarding it as "a task enjoined by heaven" and "the ardent desire of my soul" (253), because he also wanted to end the monster by himself, to seek for revenge. It was mutual hatred between Frankenstein and the monster: they wanted to destroy each other, and finally, they died together. With penetration and brutality being the key characteristic of sodomy, the chase symbolized a twisted relationship between Frankenstein and the monster. Frankenstein, being the monster's creator, always had control over the fate of the monster, deciding if he could have a partner. But after Frankenstein denied the monster's right to companionship, the monster rose up to be Frankenstein's master (206), gaining power over him. The main elements in their power dynamics were domination and manipulation, that finally resulted in a mutual destruction, "the very remembrance of us[them] both will speedily vanish"(274).

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1. Summary

This paper makes a comprehensive analysis of Gothic homophobia in Frankenstein, a work handed down by Mary Shelley, a 19th century British woman writer, by means of literature review, theoretical research, graphic analysis and text analysis. Evil and destructive results were caused by the power tension in male relationship. It represented social attitudes toward non-normative sexuality according with the British law during the period, that often practiced death sentence towards sodomy. Between 1800 and 1835, more than 50 people in England were hanged for sodomy. The tragic ending in Frankenstein reflected the plight of people performing homosexual behaviors in the society in England, that they was doomed to demolition and death. The research on the problems of homosexuality and homophobia can make the society gradually understand the existence of this group, reduce the hidden fear and hatred in the public mind, and understand its needs, so as to further improve the legal system of all countries and make the social development more sound and harmonious.

### 5.2. Looking forward

Due to the limitation of the length of the article, this paper fails to make a detailed description of the causes of the study of homosexual psychosociology, the sociological problems of homosexual marriage, and the ethical dilemmas and solutions of homophobic people. Whether the causes of homosexuality and homophobia are influenced by innate genes, hormone levels, brain structure, or the environment of postnatal family upbringing, social and cultural environment, trauma experience and other aspects, scholars need to do more research in individual physiology, psychological development, social environment and other fields. Due to the author's strong interest in academic research on this subject, further sociological research will be carried out in this direction in the future.

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