



On the Phenomenon of “Embodiment” in 19th Century British Literature

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Abstract. This paper selects three English literary works, *Frankenstein*, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, all of which were created in the 19th century, and uses archetype theory to analyze the similarities of the three works in structure, character and plot: their archetypes are from the Bible and ancient Greek and Roman mythology, showing an obvious sense of binary opposition. Combined with the background of the times, the linear changes in the theme, narrative and role shaping of these three books will be analyzed to conclude the turning characteristics of the 19th century British literary trend of thought: the questioning of “rationality”, the diversification of narrative perspectives and the new understanding of the relationship between body and mind.

Keywords: 19th century, British literature, embodiment

1 Introduction

The search for self is the consistent theme of western literature, and self is a complex whole, which has both body and mind. In the 19th century, there was a special kind of “body” phenomenon in British literary works: giving a certain psychological state of a character a form that is detached from or even contrary to the original body, such as “Monster”, “Hyde” and “Dorian Gray’s portrait”. The three corresponding works, *Frankenstein* (1818), *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), have strong scientific or allegorical color, and have common ground in structure, character and plot. Not only that, but also from the time sequence of the first publication of the three works and the heterogeneity between their works, the turn of British literary trend in the 19th century can be seen.

This thesis will use the archetype theory in cognitive stylistics to analyze the structure, character and plot commonalities in *Frankenstein*, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. According to their chronological order, it summarizes some characteristics of the turn of thought in 19th century British literature through the differences in the theme, narrative and role shaping of the three works.

2 The Sound of Times: Works and Writers

It is undoubted that Mary Shelley (1797-1851), Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894), and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) glitter and passionate with talent, but pitifully they all experienced too much setbacks and died young. The content of their works, such as “Frankenstein” electrifies the assembled corpse to create a “Monster”, “Jekyll” switches to “Hyde” by taking special drugs, and the “Portrait” of “Dorian Gray” can replace Gray to become old and ugly, are closely related to those masters’ life story.

Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was created in late Victorian time, the theme of which is discussing the concept “Variation”² earlier proposed by Mary Shelley, “Mother of Science Fiction”, in *Frankenstein*. Oscar Wilde referred to *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* many times in *The Decay of Lying*¹⁷, which shows his familiarity with the literary work. Soviet scholar АНИКСТ¹ wrote that “we can see a very interesting contrast between *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.” Chen Liangting also wrote that “Oscar Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray* under the influence of his work (Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) and *The Oval Portrait*.”¹¹

Even though Stevenson was not directly affected by Mary Shelley, and Wilde was not directly affected by Stevenson. Considering the tangle between British romanticism and naturalism and aestheticism in the 19th century under the historical conditions of rapid development of capitalism⁷, we can also find a deeper connection between the three masters from another aspect. The carding of the relationship between writers and their works is of unique significance for exploring the characterization and causes of “embodiment”. The charm of classics lies in that it is not only a personal expression, but also a condensation of the thoughts of the times and a writing of collective unconsciousness.

3 Interpretation of the Text of “Embodiment”

3.1 Archetype of Structure

Northrop Frye believes that “archetype is a typical or recurring image... it links a poem with other poems and thus helps to unify and integrate our literary experience.”³ Frye insists that literary research should start with the Bible, because the Bible is the center of western culture and has the nature as an encyclopedia. As a mythological prototypal system, the Bible is an important source of literary images and symbols. Ancient Greek and Roman mythology are another important source of archetype. The structural archetypes in *Frankenstein*, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are taken from the tragic structure of “being tempted - falling - struggling - dying” in the Bible.

The Bible records that Adam and Eve, the ancestors of mankind, are seduced by the Snake, violates the command of the LORD and eat the “forbidden fruit”, resulting in “original sin”, because this event Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden. In the story, “snake” is the embodiment of Satan. The experience of Adam, Eve and

their descendants has actually become the archetype of the whole human experience in the Christian concept, a process from crime, degeneration to atonement and salvation, or without salvation, and finally painfully towards death. For example, in the story of “Noah’s Ark” in the Old Testament, human beings are punished by floods. Jung and Frye believe that literature is the continuation and the result of “replacement” of myth. The three works selected skillfully “replace” the myth of “human beings fall and struggle to death after being seduced”, and endow it with new forms and connotations.

The first is that Satan or the characters who play the role of “seducer” are not clearly shown in this three works. The temptation of Frankenstein, Jekyll and Dorian Gray come from their hearts. Frankenstein wants to overcome death and falls into the taboo study of creating life feverishly; Jekyll does not suppress the desire to have fun and chose to create the evil personality of “Hyde”; Dorian Gray intends to remain young and beautiful forever and after his wish is realized, he is proud of his “beauty” and repeatedly commits crimes¹⁸. Second, in the process of “depravity”, the three characters are not blindly passive. Their struggle and resistance also show their subjectivity, but their actions have failed. Frankenstein is afraid that the monster will multiply, so he refuses the monster’s request for a partner. The angry monster kills Frankenstein’s friend and wife successively. Jekyll urges himself to do good in order to make up for his mistakes, but finally succumbs to his inner desire. Dorian Gray wants to be a new man after committing the crime of killing. He did not elope with an innocent girl, but he, in fact, holds impure motive and hypocritical attitude. His portrait becomes more and more bloody and ugly. Third, it is not the external force (the incarnation of God) that causes the death of the character, but the character itself, by imposing the punishment. Frankenstein tracks the monster to the North Pole for revenge and dies of fatigue on a ship. When his sin is about to be discovered, Jekyll chooses to commit suicide and dies together with “Hyde”. Dorian Gray stabs the knife at the portrait, but the knife unexpectedly sticks in his chest.¹⁸ The structural archetype of “human beings fall and struggle to die after being seduced” presents an inverted “U” linear structure¹². Although the three works differ in details, the character story follows this structure in essence.

3.2 Archetype of Character

Mary Shelley, Stevenson and Wilde are all English writers, and the Bible and ancient Greek and Roman mythology are their creative sources. Frye believes that “the most condensed metaphorical form of myth is the two aspects of immortality and death of the same identity... the theme of a higher self and a lower self is reflected in people’s different feelings.”⁴ The relationship between Frankenstein and anonymous monster, Jekyll and Hyde, and Dorian Gray and his portrait is similar. Combined with the text, more detailed character archetypes are as follows: Prometheus and Frankenstein, Janus and Jekyll, Narcissus and Dorian Gray.

Prometheus is a god in ancient Greek mythology. With Athena, the goddess of wisdom, he creates human beings: Prometheus sculpts human shapes with clay, and Athena pours soul into clay figurines. Later, Prometheus angers Zeus by stealing fire and sending it to human beings. He suffers from being pecked by an eagle every day. The

complete name of the book, *Frankenstein: A Story of Modern Prometheus*, links Frankenstein with Prometheus. Mary Shelley wrote this book at the late stage of the Enlightenment, and was deeply influenced by romanticism, opposing rationality and advocating nature. Prometheus is regarded as a typical example of fighting against nature. He abuses divine power and creates human beings. Humans kill each other, causing war, and making life miserable and the divine world uneasy. At that time, it seems that Prometheus does not make great achievements, but does wrong things. In *Frankenstein* doubts about the nature of life after the accidental death of his mother, hoping to achieve “resurrection” through technology, but the “monster” he creates is not accepted by the world, which eventually leads to bloodshed and violence, and he also dies. The archetype of Frankenstein is Prometheus.

Janus is the most mysterious and unfathomable god in ancient Roman mythology. His image is that he has a face at the front and back of his head, while looking at two opposite directions, which means he is in charge of the past and the future. Because of its two faces, Janus has gradually become synonymous with duplicity. He “symbolizes everything in the world that is in contradiction... only the two sides of the contradiction complete the world, making everything and phenomena form a complete whole.”¹⁴ Jekyll and Hyde have different morphological characteristics, but they have the same body. The contradictions implied by the “double face” characteristics of Jekyll and Hyde is the same with Janus. Therefore, the archetype of Jekyll and Hyde is Janus.

Narcissus is the son of the ancient Greek myth of the river god and a water fairy. He is handsome and attractive, but narcissistic and arrogant, and humiliates others in all ways. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, punishes him for falling in love with his reflection in the water, so he throws himself into the river and becomes a narcissus after death. Dorian Gray, like Narcissus, is beautiful, self-satisfied, and dismissive of the love and kindness of others. What’s more, Dorian does not keep pure morals. Instead, he plays around and even causes his lover’s death. At the end of the novel, Dorian cuts the portrait with a knife in regret, but makes himself die, just as Narcissus chases the illusion in the water but drowns in the river. Neither of them is deeply aware of the cause of their tragedies. The picture of Dorian restores to the original state after his death, which is similar to the reflection of Narcissus in the river, symbolizing the truth, goodness and beauty left behind. The original text also writes that once, out of a childish spirit, Dorian imitated the Narcissus and kissed -- in fact, he just pretended to kiss -- the two lips on the painting that are now smiling at him. This description also confirms the imitation of Narcissus by Dorian. It can be seen that the archetype of Dorian Gray is Narcissus.

Frankenstein wants to break away from the gap between life and death, Jekyll wants to draw the line between good and evil, and Dorian Gray wants to remain young and beautiful forever. Although the specific archetypes of the three characters are different, they all attempt to break through a certain “inevitability” and imply “immortality and death exist on the same body or identity”.

3.3 Archetype of Plot

On the basis of Frye's archetype theory, Ryken further points out that the conflict between good and evil is the main plot throughout the Bible. "In a sense, almost every event in the Bible is a repetition of the conflict between the prototypical plot of good and evil"¹³, such as God and Satan, God and rebellious human, God's angel and fallen angel, good man and evil man, heaven and hell, The will of God and the temptation of the devil. The betrayal of Adam and Eve is the first conflict between good and evil in the Bible, forming a prototypical plot. This has also deeply influenced the novel creation of Mary Shelley, Stevenson and Wilde, but the three authors mainly use the conflict plot of good and evil in the Bible to depict the scene conflict, human conflict and human inner conflict. Frye holds the belief that "the apocalyptic symbol represents a world that is infinitely pleasing to people's minds."³, and "contrary to the apocalyptic symbol, it is the manifestation of a world in which people's wishes have been completely denied... it is a world in which people's imagination has not yet had any impact on it... there are torture tools, foolish marks, ruins and tombs, and a world of futility and depravity everywhere."³ It can be seen from this that the conflict between good and evil is reflected in the scene of the story, that is, the contradiction between heaven and hell.

Frankenstein's journey before and after meeting the monster and the scene of the monster in the shack and the forest are diametrically opposite: Frankenstein's journey before meeting the monster is warm and pleasant, but after the meeting, he cannot enjoy the beautiful scenery any more, and the whole scene is shrouded in a gloomy atmosphere like his mood; The monster's life in the shack is quiet and peaceful, while when he is driven to the forest by people who hate him, the whole scene is described as horrible. In *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Jekyll and Hyde have very different living environments: Jekyll's villa is located in a clean and expansive square, the door is elegant, the hall is spacious, the furniture is expensive, and the style is elegant; The shabby house that Hyde rents is located on the dirty street in the slum and the environment is dark and chaotic. The birthplace of the picture in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* - the painter's studio and garden are in sharp contrast with the scenes of each crime of Dorian: the painter's studio and garden are clean and bright, and the scenery is beautiful and harmonious while the scenes of Dorian breaking up with Sibyl, killing Bezel and going to the Opium House are very frightening and creepy.

The conflict of people is reflected in the different attitudes of people towards the protagonist in the novel. The monster is not excluded at the beginning. After escaping from the laboratory, he meets a blind old man who accepts him and lives peacefully for a period of time. However, the old man's families hate and expel him as much as other residents in the town; Frankenstein himself also gradually loses the support of his family members. In *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Jekyll is pleased with the appearance and existence of "Hyde" at the beginning. Later, when Hyde is so powerful that Jekyll cannot control him, Jekyll begins to hate Hyde. Jekyll's friends show opposite attitudes towards Jekyll's dual identity, and Utterson and Hyde even have a quarrel. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Bezel and Henry have been originally friends, but they have conflicts in their treatment of Dorian: the painter Bezel advises Dorian not to do evil, to stay away from temptation, and feels sad and painful because of Dorian's fall,

while Sir Henry constantly stimulates Dorian’s vanity, prevents Dorian from becoming good, and even contributes to the decline of Dorian.

The inner conflict of the characters is more obvious. Frankenstein once wants to satisfy the monster’s request for a mate, but he is not willing to let the monster survive and multiply, and the monster also experiences struggle and pain before committing murder. Jekyll realizes that man is a mixture of good and evil, and he lingers between these two natures. Jekyll and Hyde resent each other at last, and finally Jekyll chooses to kill himself because he cannot suppress the “Hyde” in his body. Dorian Gray is even more so. He always feels flustered and guilty after committing a crime, but he soon falls into the trap of hedonism and indulges in the face of increasingly ugly portraits. He regrets his behavior but secretly pleases that he can avoid getting older at the same time. No matter the scene, the characters or the conflicts of good and evil in the characters’ hearts, all echo the plot archetype in the Bible. The essence of its binary opposition makes the plot context clear and profound.

4 Interpretation of the Literary Thought of “Embodiment”

4.1 Theme of “Seeking Truth”

From *Frankenstein* to *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, then to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the shaping, presentation and pursuit of “truth” at the theme level has gradually deepened. From the perspective of the history of western civilization, “the 19th century can be appropriately called the century of science”⁸. After the gestation and accumulation in the 17th and 18th centuries, European natural science has reached unprecedented prosperity in the 19th century. “Erwin Schrodinger, a famous scientist, says that as our culture itself becomes more scientific, artists’ creative methods may also become more rational and closer to science... In many fields, artists have received a lot of help from science, especially from formal materials and technology.”⁹ Scientific technology and scientific spirit not only affect people’s material life, but also play an important role in the field of humanities and social sciences, which can be indicated in the electric experiment in *Frankenstein* and the drug experiment in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. However, it is not the proportion of scientific and technological descriptions in the content of the three works that decide their linear continuous deepening on the theme of “seeking truth”. “Science is a function of the human mind that plays a role in society. Science has revealed to us the organizational level in the universe. But mind and science itself are the products of social level, and may be able to conduct research on the suitable level (social level) for them like any other phenomenon”¹⁰. The three works construct the “aesthetic” experiment and “human nature” experiment at the social level, and their rational spirit and theme of “seeking truth” are more and more profound.

The first two of the three works, *Frankenstein* and *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, both show the exploration of the relationship between technology and ethics, and satire the “alienation” of technology to human beings. In other words, the truth-seeking of the novel comes from the use of scientific means and the questioning of its results. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* goes further in another way. Hölderlin⁶ points out

that “the highest action of reason is an aesthetic action”, and “truth and goodness can only become siblings in beauty”. Although the content of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does not involve scientific elements, the discussion of “beauty” and “goodness” in the article has overcome the doctrine of objectivism and negate the absolute rationality of rationalism to creatively achieve the practice of seeking “reason” and “truth”.

4.2 Narration from a “multifaceted” perspective

The narrator in *Frankenstein* is the captain. In his letter to his sister, he describes the story of listening to Frankenstein after he saves him. The text then starts with Frankenstein as the first person. The captain is actually the listener of the story, and has not participated in Frankenstein’s story.¹⁵ *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* starts the story from the perspective of Jekyll’s friend Utterson. In Utterson’s pursuit of the truth about Jekyll’s relationship with Hyde, Jekyll’s experience has been exposed in a limited scale. It can be said that Utterson is not a complete bystander in the story, but plays an important role in promoting it. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the “polyphonic” narrative is completely adopted. The dialogue and psychological monologue between the painter Bezel, Dorian Gray himself and Sir Henry are presented in the text.

If the three stories are regarded as “social experiments”, the readers of *Frankenstein* are in the position of captain -- they do not witness or participate in the experiment, but only understand it through Frankenstein’s narration; In *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the readers explore the identity of Hyde and the secret of Jekyll together with Utterson. Although they have a sense of participation, they are limited to the perspective, and cannot understand the whole picture of the event; The readers of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are “present” from the beginning to the end. With the process of the experiment, they switch their perspectives and experience the character story “immersively”, which can be said that readers can play the role of both the operator of the whole “experiment” and the “experimental object” itself. In general, although the three works adopt various narrative methods, the narrative perspective is gradually expanded to a “panoramic” state. The deepening sense of closeness and participation to the “experiment” enable readers to play multiple roles, and their understanding and thinking of the story thus become more profound and diverse.

4.3 Characters of “Medical and Disease in One Entity”

The literature of the 19th century is intertwined with the development of physiology and psychology at that time. “The human mind is not just a rational function. The irrational elements... also occupy an important position in it. The existence of the human mind cannot be completely separated from the existence of the body. Therefore, the mind is deeply rooted in the natural and cultural environment in which the body is located.”¹⁵ The refreshment of the cognition of the relationship between body and mind has brought the pathological research of human physiology and psychology to a higher level, which is also deeply reflected in the literary works of the same era.

“Frankenstein and the monster”, “Jekyll and Hyde” and “Dorian Gray and his portrait” all discuss the possibility of psychosis in physical therapy, so the three roles

actually have the role characteristics of “doctor” and “patient”. The characteristic of the three pairs’ “medical and disease in one entity” shows an increasingly close linear process. Frankenstein’s enthusiasm for science and the issue of life and death leads to the birth of the monster, which can be said that the monster is a real result of his psychological state. Frankenstein is far away from his family because of “scientific fanaticism”, while the monster is eager for company. Frankenstein refuses the request of the monster, so the monster kills his families to let him feel the pain of loneliness. Although Frankenstein and the monster are two “separate” bodies, their psychologies have the same disease. Frankenstein is not understood because of “scientific fanaticism”, and the monster is not understood because of its appearance. Jekyll and Hyde are in the same body but different sides. Jekyll himself has the professional identity of “doctor”. It can be said that he contributes to the birth of Hyde and the subsequent confrontation with Hyde are the embodiment of his treatment of his own inner disease. However, Dorian Gray’s “medical and disease integration” phenomenon goes further because his inner “abnormality” is no longer reflected in the appearance.

5 Conclusions

The three British literary works created in the 19th century have some similarities in terms of structure, character and plot archetypes: their archetypes are from the Bible and ancient Greek and Roman mythology, and the archetypes show an obvious sense of binary opposition. It can be said that these commonalities are also the embodiment and crystallization of the time’s thoughts. However, the three works created in different years also have differences in theme, narrative and character shaping. These differences even show linear trend in time, reflecting the turn of the 19th century British literary thought: the question of “rationality”, the diversification of narrative perspective and the new understanding of the relationship between body and mind.

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