

An Interpretation of Light Imagery in *Frankenstein* from an Archetypal Perspective

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Abstract

In her masterpiece *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley borrows and shapes many classic archetypal images and gives them personal values. Among them, the imagery of light in the form of “sun”, “moon” and “fire” appears throughout the text. This study analyzes the specific use of these three types of light imagery in this text, based on Frye’s theory of archetypal criticism. It discusses the dual characteristics of the imagery of the sun, the moon, and fire in the text, the consistency between the changes in the imagery and the emotional changes of the novel’s characters, and the foreshadowing of the plot development by the characteristics of each imagery to analyze the plot homogeneity achieved through the use of imagery and to explain the author’s style in the shape of the imagery of “light”. The interpretation of the imagery of light in *Frankenstein* from an archetypal perspective will help readers better understand the literary meaning of the work.

Keywords: *Frankenstein*, archetypal, imagery, light

1. Introduction

In 1818, Mary Shelley, a famous 19th-century novelist, wrote the literary work *Frankenstein*, which is regarded as the first genuine science fiction novel in the world. The work is a treacherous and poignant account of Victor Frankenstein, who is a science and eccentric who carries out “artificial human” experiments for his scientific selfishness and is subsequently devastated by the powerful backlash of the created life-form monster. Mary has created a lot of imagery in the book, especially the imagery of light. The different kinds of light, which change from bright and warm to bleak and dark, set a sad emotional tone for the novel, and also reveal the tragic fate of the characters and the darkness deep inside.

Frye once defined the archetype as a kind of universal and repetitive imagery. He believed that through the interpretation of archetypes in literary works, one could gain insight into the commonality and developmental laws of texts and relate them to the whole human society. The academic research on the archetypes of *Frankenstein* primarily focuses on character archetypes and psychology. And this paper will apply Frye’s archetypal criticism theory to interpret the light imagery. The imagery of light in *Frankenstein* is mainly in the form of sunlight, moonlight, and firelight. By applying the characteristics of different kinds of light imagery in the text, Mary realizes the homogeneity of the plot and the layers out of clues, guiding the tragic direction of the tragedy of a sorrowful and bizarre fate.

2. The Imagery of the Sun

In the book *The Hero and the Sun*, Ye Shuxian once pointed out, “In essence, the process of the rise and fall of the sun and the moon are objective and do not depend on human will. ... On the contrary, the phenomena of social life and human destiny are far more difficult to recognize and understand than the regular and orderly natural processes. They need to be explained by natural necessity” (Ye, 1986, p. 43). Mary incorporates the symbol of the sun, which has special significance, into the storyline of *Frankenstein* flexibly as a way to express her unique understanding of this cultural paradigm. The essay uses the primitive human sun worship as the spiritual nourishment for the plot development of the story, reflecting the fluctuation of the protagonist’s emotions through the changing form of the sun, and suggesting the evolutionary trend of the plot by the cycle of sunrise and sunset.

2.1 Two Dimensions of Sun Worship

In his biographical masterpiece, *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer suggests that the primitive worship of the sun by humans originated from witchcraft and was carried out in mythology. “All things are demons, including the sun and the moon” (Enryu, 1992, p. 24). In solar mythology, the sun is given divine characteristics and exists in the form of a nature god. “This creation is the embodiment of primitive nature worship, and the study of the sun issue is predicated on the recognition of the existence of a sun god and as part of religious belief” (Sun, 2020, p. 39). In the novel *Frankenstein*, when the monster tells the details of the suffering he endured and expresses a strong personal prayer for a partner, he says: “by the sun, and by the blue sky of heaven... that if you grant my prayer...” (Shelly, 2012, p. 149). The human subconscious is usually amplified and manifested in critical situations. The monster, who is short of companionship desperately, chooses to take an oath as proof because of his extreme fear of being rejected by Frankenstein. His choice of the sun as the object of his oath at the critical moment is not an occasional phenomenon, but out of the sun worship that pours into his mind in the form of the collective unconscious.

Based on the changing pattern of the sun rising in the east and setting in the west and its decisive influence on the growth of crops, humans created the sun god as the ruler of light. Despite the differences in the Chinese and Western designations of the sun god, all depictions of the sun god’s divine personality focus on his symbolism of light, his power to heal, and his supreme authority. “We can explore the significance of the archetypal symbol of the Sun God from the two dimensions of material and abstract” (Li, Cheng, & Xu, 2008, p. 115). The worship of the sun god with material tendencies takes advantage of the dazzling sunlight to express the symbolic meaning of light and youth. The monster, immersed in the hatred of human indifference, decided to set out on the road of escape. “The day, which was one of the first of spring, cheered even me by the loveliness of its sunshine ... I felt emotions of gentleness and pleasure, that had long appeared dead, revive within me” (Shelly, 2012, p. 140). The writing here is a concrete manifestation of material god worship. In contrast, abstract god worship exalts the pursuit of rationality, which is specifically expressed in enthusiasm and the ability to exercise moderate self-restraint. The monster had been enraged by the expulsion of the Dreiser family, but he still restrained himself in the daytime and decided to develop his plans in the dark. And when Frankenstein fled after defying the monster, his agitated mood kept changing with the scenery, “and the sun rose from the ocean... my feelings became calmer” (Shelly, 2012, p. 172). Whether from madness to caution, or to smooth out restlessness in times of crisis quickly, under the majesty of the sun, the changes made by the characters in the novel are a concentrated expression of abstract God worship.

2.2 The Psychological Difference Between Expectation and Despondency

“There are three unique characteristics of light that symbolize important qualities of the mind and spirit. First, the visibility of light makes it the clearest symbol of the state of mind, a characteristic that possesses a pearl of profound and enduring wisdom that awakens latent power within people” (Ye, 2011, p. 201). In the work *Frankenstein*, the portrayal of solar imagery largely reflects the changes in the psychology of the characters.

When the monster first visited Dreiser’s house, he described the weather of that day as, “when the sun shone on the red leaves that strewed the ground and diffused cheerfulness, although it denied warmth,” (Shelly, 2012, p. 132). The temperature of that day is no different from any cold winter day, but the monster still feels happy in the extreme weather. This kind of cheerfulness brought by the sun’s reflection is the monster’s inner leap of emotion. And When Frankenstein’s honeymoon ended, the sun dropped below the horizon as he stepped ashore. A brief escape does not change the threatened dilemma, Frankenstein’s return means that the prologue of life and death is about to start. The process of the sun sinking is portrayed here as the process of Frankenstein’s fear deepening and mood plummeting.

2.3 The Foreshadowing of Happiness and Sadness

The sun is often used in literature to signify hope, and its radiant light often heralds creation and enlightenment. The sun is often used in literature to signify hope, and its radiant light often heralds creation and enlightenment. In the monster’s first verbal coaxing of Frankenstein, he swears by the sun that “the sun is yet high in the heavens; before it descends to hide itself behind your snowy precipices and illuminate another world, you will have heard my story and can decide” (Shelly, 2012, p. 97). In the afterglow of the sun, the monster pours out his self-righteous suffering that deviates from the cause and effect of Frankenstein. The unsettled sunlight here foretells that the monster is about to reveal his hidden secrets, while the imagery of the sun that illuminates another world shows the monster’s extreme thirst for warmth. The monster, who perceives his identity as a marginalized figure in society accurately, expects to allow Frankenstein to experience his inner world and be pampered through a deep and intimate conversation.

Unlike the wonderful symbolism of a bright sun, the imagery of the setting sun often directs the course of tragedy, implying pain or revealing darkness and death. "I knew that I ought to hasten my descent towards the valley, as I should soon be encompassed in darkness" (Shelly, 2012, p. 149). Frankenstein, who had been distraught after the conversation, agreed to the monster's request to defy the law and parted with the monster in the setting sun. When the sunlight is gradually drowned by darkness, it also foreshadows all the subsequent useless struggles made to hide the shameless sin.

3. The Imagery of the Moon

The *Dictionary of Symbolism* regards the moon as "the second most important celestial body after the Sun in terms of symbolic significance" (Bidman, 2000, p. 442). The *Bible* records in *Genesis* that the moon was created on the fourth day of God's creation of the world to distinguish between day and night, and that its light shone on the earth universally. The novel *Frankenstein* contains many detailed descriptions of the moon's brightness and extinction, including the joyfulness of the vast moonlight pouring out, the loneliness and misery scattered under the cold moon, and the evil hidden under the obscure moonlight. The multiple characteristics of the moon in Mary's work emphasize the absurdity and weirdness of the story, and the moon's depression also adds some bleak atmosphere to the characters and the development of the plot.

3.1 The Dual Nature of Disclosure and Concealment

The changing and cyclical nature of the moon constitutes a different symbol of life and death, and this opposing character intertwines in the organic unity of the moon, giving the intention a characteristic literary tension. The dual nature of the moon makes the monster's evil oscillate between being revealed and being hidden, which adds more possibilities to Frankenstein's despair and provides more imagination space for readers.

After Frankenstein terminates the agreement with the monster unilaterally, the book portrays the scene he encounters on his way to escape as: "all nature reposed under the eye of the quiet moon" (Shelly, 2012, p. 169). The bright moonlight witnessed Frankenstein's brief spiritual triumph, providing a moment of mental peace while hiding the dark dealings in the silent night at sea completely. And on his wedding night, as Frankenstein was grieving for the death of his new wife, he saw "the pale-yellow light of the moon illuminates the chamber" (Shelly, 2012, p. 201). suddenly. Looking back in the direction of the light, he was surprised to see the hideous figure that had killed Elizabeth standing in front of the window. By the time Frankenstein begins his pursuit, the monster has disappeared into silent blackness. In the pale moonlight, the monstrous evil is starkly visible, but the dimness of the moonlight gives the real killer an easy escape. The light of the moon makes the evil cannot be hidden, but the weakness of the moonlight makes the uncovering of the evil fall into the dead silence. In the description of the madness of sin, Mary uses the imagery of the moon with rational colors and leaves the reader with unlimited imagination by the light of the moon, which gives the moon imagery a more profound symbolic and metaphorical role.

3.2 The Alternation of Emotions from Elation to Silence

The moon has always been seen as a symbol of femininity, and this concept originated from the ancient cult of fertility and is rooted in the human psyche deeply. Through the expansion of thought and symbolic expression, the concept of the moon developed out of the myth of motherhood and was linked to the myth of the wife. And in turn, the moon became associated with the feeling of reunion and longing deeply. "The meaning of the moon has also expanded, forming a cultural cluster centered on the moon that includes imagery such as femininity and longing" (An, 2019, p. 115). In *Paradise Lost*, Milton has drawn an analogy between the form of the moon and the figure of a mysteriously beautiful woman, comparing the sight of the moon rising from the clouds to a queen in a silver cloak breathtakingly shining over the whole world.

"The expanded imagery of 'moon' is developed on the basis of the original imagery. One of these images is that the moon is considered to be a companion and an important spiritual support for human beings" (Shen, 2021, p. 24). The monster in *Frankenstein* was not conceived in a human womb, but is an artificial creature, and was abandoned at the time of his birth, so he desperately needs the company of his family. He looked up at the moon on a night when he was alone, and only then did he understand what light he longed for for the first time, saying, "the only object that I could distinguish was the bright moon" (Shelly, 2012, p. 99). The monster in the turmoil is delighted by the company of the moonlight, which wraps him in gentle silence, just like a mother embracing her missing baby. The imagery of the moon becomes the most yearning light in the heart of the monster wrapped in darkness. On the dull and empty night, a bright moon makes him stop his sadness for a while and feel peace and tranquility. Looking at the entire novel, the urgency, and depression in the development of the plot are frequently slowed down by the sudden change of silence, and the religious meaning of forgiveness and redemption is added to the cruel sin and punishment.

“In Western literature, the moon frequently contains variable and realistic meanings” (Sun, 2022, p. 16). In addition to the traditional metaphor of happiness and grief, Mary repeatedly uses the moon in the text and gives it a new connotation. Unlike the monster’s delight at seeing the moonlight for the first time, he gradually becomes accustomed to the moon when he is used to living alone, and describes the subsequent moon forms as “the orb of night had greatly lessened” (Shelly, 2012, p. 99) and “the moon had disappeared from the night, and again, with a lessened form” (Shelly, 2012, p. 100). The monster at this moment is no longer just immersed in the moon’s bleak companionship, he began to learn to distinguish his senses and learn survival instincts, and the moon’s status within the monster gradually fades as its size diminishes. After the monster sprouted a longing for the warm atmosphere of the Dreiser family, his gaze shifted completely from the moon. On a night as bleak as his first descent, he lamented, “nature again assume the barren and bleak appearance it had worn when I first beheld the woods and the lovely moon” (Shelly, 2012, p. 131). If the reason for the monster’s repeated changes in attitude is attributed to the moon’s changing form, then his indifference in the face of the same scenery a year later is a proof of the monster’s complete change of mind. The moon is a symbol of both the real world and his inner world. Unlike the salvation of his soul, which is obtained by relying on external objects in the cold company, the monster who has experienced reversal relies on the slight warmth brought by the moonlight no longer but begins to seek self-rescue as he continuously grows.

3.3 *The Prelude to the Desolate Destruction*

The soft and mysterious moon hangs silently in the night. The *New Testament* indicates the coming of woe by changing the color of the moon from clear to blood. In *Frankenstein*, the imagery of the moon also appears several times as a dark thread that is coterminous with the storyline and has the importance of foreshadowing the development of the story.

The first detailed description of the moon in the text is the night of Frankenstein’s panic escape when the monster descended, “by the dim and yellow light of the moon” (Shelly, 2012, p. 49), with the ugly face continuing to reveal, the subsequent endless evil also seen in the dim moon. And when Frankenstein fled due to the unilateral breach of contract, the original clear moon changed form suddenly after he stepped into the escape canoe, “at one time the moon, which had before been clear, was suddenly overspread by a thick cloud” (Shelly, 2012, p. 174). Frankenstein walked alone in the darkness of the night, and was taken to prison after disembarking; when he met the monster for the last time, “Suddenly the broad disk of the moon arose and shone full upon his ghastly and distorted shape as he fled with more than mortal speed” (Shelly, 2012, p. 209). Just like his first escape, under the moonlight, Frankenstein witnessed the appearance and disappearance of the monster’s monstrous body once again, which is set to echo the episode of Frankenstein’s first escape. However, the dominant player in the whole situation has changed from the creator to the creation, and the ironic effect of the essay has reached the extreme. The sowing of moonlight indicates the progression of sin, which is revealed under the moonlight covering. The imagery of the moon is not only a gruesome and gloomy atmosphere but also serves as a synonym for the plot.

4. The Imagery of Fire

Frye had compared the world of fire to the land of evil demons, and believed that fire manifested itself in this world by burning the pagans along with the rest of the city, causing the whole city to fall into catastrophic destruction (Frye, 2006, p. 172). “The ‘holy spirit’, ‘destruction’, ‘salvation’, ‘revenge’, ‘passion’ and ‘humanity’ are several typical images of ‘fire’ in Western literature” (Xu, 2017, p. 118). The imagery of fire is present throughout the text. The two main characters in *Frankenstein* both build unrealistic dreams for themselves through the first glimpses of tiny fires, but their visions are burned up in the flames.

4.1 *The Dual Nature of Purification and Destruction*

“The original meaning of ‘fire’ in Western mythology is a representation of salvation and destruction, a fountain of hope and sin” (Wang, 2022, p. 92). In ancient Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire to save mankind from danger, and the fire here is vigorous and hopeful, representing the spark of life. In *Genesis*, Sodom, and Gomorrah committed various sins, and the Lord was so angry that he sent down sulfur and fire, causing the city to be destroyed in an instant. The fire in this case is a symbol of punishment and great danger, representing the burning of destruction. In *Frankenstein*, the monster’s first encounter with fire is extensively portrayed. The heat of the sparks revives his frozen soul, while the sting of the flames makes the budding excitement disappear. The monster lamented that “the same cause should produce such opposite effects” (Shelly, 2012, p. 100). The duality of the fire imagery here corresponds to the core of the essay’s theme of the destruction that comes with the selfish desire for wantonness.

Fire imagery is used extensively in *Frankenstein* to emphasize the passion and power of the plot, and the

purifying and destructive effects of fire are reflected in the text. However, influenced by the established tragic ending of the novel, the fire imagery in the text tends to be more destructive. The young Frankenstein looks forward to someone to lead him out of the blindness of adolescence and to put his desire for knowledge to effective advantage. "... so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump... I never beheld anything so utterly destroyed" (Shelly, 2012, p. 31). After witnessing the power of fire, the troubled Frankenstein could not help but be in awe of the mysterious and unpredictable nature. He abandoned complex and useless pseudo-scientific research and instead delved into mathematics and new scientific techniques "built on a solid foundation" to gain a deeper understanding. Willnet said that "the nature of light consists in the fact that too much light can cause eye blindness as a consequence" (Ye, 2011, p. 202). After witnessing the tragic deaths of William and Justin one after another, Frankenstein declared war on the monster's rage, "I may extinguish the spark which I so negligently bestowed" (Shelly, 2012, p. 95). Frankenstein had redefined the direction of his life through the medium of fire, defining his creation as the spark of life, but he was burned by the flames of fire severely due to his over-indulgence, and his paranoid passion inspired by fire eventually died in a complex mind intertwined with greed and cowardice.

4.2 The Emotional Shift from Relief to Tyranny

In contrast to the brief psychological changes caused by changes in the brightness of the sun or the moon, *Frankenstein* has a more profound construction of the imagery of fire, which runs throughout the monster's fate. "I found a fire which had been left by some wandering beggars and was overcome with delight at the warmth I experienced from it" (Shelly, 2012, p. 100). Since the monster's descent into the world, the experience of being abandoned and banished has instilled in him a sinking sense of malice. Amid the famine and cold situation, the remnants of the campfire warmed both the monster's tired body and his wounded heart. When his ingratiating was met with the disgust of the Dreiser family, the monster decided to set fire after being disheartened, and "the cottage was quickly enveloped by the flames, which clung to it and licked it with their forked and destroying tongues" (Shelly, 2012, p. 139). The ferocity of the fire indicates the monster's extreme madness. At this moment, the monster no longer revels in the warmth of the sporadic fire and his mind is wrapped in evil and arrogance. *Revelation* records that "all things that symbolize evil, such as the devil, death, and the underworld, are thrown into the lake of fire and burned." Correspondingly, the monster in the novel chooses to end his life by self-immolation eventually. "I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly and exult in the agony of the torturing flames..." (Shelly, 2012, p. 231). The monster compares the process of suffering to searing, which indicates that the imagery of fire has changed from a gift of warmth to a burden of suffering in the monster's consciousness. The self-immolation of the monster with a triumphant spirit shows that fire still occupies a lofty position in his heart and he still has a warm attachment to it deep in his heart. It can be seen from the above that in *Frankenstein*, the fire imagery is quite consistent with the monster's emotional changes. As with the character's mind, the fire is either warm, searing, or raging, and as the adjectives keep changing, the monster's emotions have to be externalized.

4.3 The Precursors to Sinful Decay

In comparison with the use of firelight to express flexible thoughts, there are not many parts of the text that use fire as a clue to foreshadow the development of the plot. The most obvious use of fire is on the night of the monster's descent, when "by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light" (Shelly, 2012, p. 48), Frankenstein, who tried to challenge the laws of nature and saw the monster for the first time. And this meeting was also the prelude to the subsequent disaster of his life. His desire to learn is ignited for the first time in a blazing fire, but as the faint candlelight goes out, so does the luster of his life. From a burning momentum to a moribund state, this is the change in the imagery of fire and the decay of Frankenstein's life.

One of the more subtle ways in which the essay is guided by the imagery of fire as a clue appears in the monster's discomfort with the Dreiser family's behavior. He does not understand why there is any trouble to be had when they can even sit around a warm fireplace, "Yet why were these gentle beings unhappy? ... they had a fire to warm them when chill and delicious viands when hungry..." (Shelly, 2012, p. 107). The disbelief shown by the monster here is a microcosm of the subtle differences between monsters and human social thinking. By comparing the monsters' and humans' different attitudes and different needs towards the imagery of fire, the author sets the stage for the later encounter in which the monsters are not accepted by the Dreiser family, and even by human society.

5. Conclusion

From the plot setting of *Frankenstein*, the author constructs a non-linear narrative structure in which light imagery in various contexts is constantly interwoven, and this unique expression makes the transformation of

light more profoundly meaningful. Mary combines appropriate tradition with bold innovation. On the one hand, it follows the traditional usage of relevant light imagery; On the other hand, it injects her creative style with the construction of the text, and gives the light imagery archetypal meaning subjectivity, and creativity, thus presenting a variety of light and shadow images. In the alternating light and darkness of the sun, the moon, and fire, she completes the transformation of the main character's fate and the construction of the main plot line successfully, guiding the development direction of the overall tragedy, which makes the work a unique aesthetic value. The archetypal perspective allows us to focus on the historical legacy and underpinnings behind many of the texts, and it is not difficult to see that *Frankenstein* is undoubtedly a fantastical work about the imagery of light.

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