Existence, Essence and Alienation: Exploring Jean-Paul Sartre's Existential Philosophy in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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Abstract:

Mary Shelley's ***Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*** is a seminal work of Gothic literature that delves into the complex interplay of science, ethics and human ambition. ***Frankenstein*** has been extensively analyzed from various perspectives, including psychoanalytical, theological, existential, eco-criticism etc. This research paper aims to analyze Mary Shelley's ***Frankenstein*** through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy, focusing on the themes such as existence, essence, bad faith, freedom, nothingness and alienation. This research paper investigates how the characters, particularly Victor Frankenstein and the creature, grapple with existential choices, their consequences and the confrontation with nothingness. Drawing from Sartre's ***Being and Nothingness***, the analysis interrogates how the novel reflects the fundamental dilemmas of human existence, such as the anguish of freedom, the burden of self-definition and the perpetual pursuit of meaning in an indifferent universe. This study employs a qualitative methodology, engaging in close textual analysis of ***Frankenstein*** alongside Sartrean concepts. This discussion also incorporates some of the philosophical ideas of Albert Camus, Martin Heideggar and Soren Kierkegaard. It advances the understanding of ***Frankenstein*** as a narrative that anticipates Sartre's philosophical explorations. By integrating Sartrean philosophy with Mary Shelley's Romantic and Gothic elements, this research situates ***Frankenstein*** as a precursor of existential literature, bridging 19th-century literary themes with 20th-century existential philosophy. It emphasizes on the connection between the novel and the evolution of existential thought highlighting the fact that 20th century existential philosophy is not a break from the tradition but a continuation of it.

Keywords: - Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism, Freedom, Nothingness.

Introduction

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, published in 1818, remains a prominent literary work in The Romantic era. It intertwines the themes of scientific ambition, ethical transgression and the complexities of the human condition. Though it has been interpreted from various critical perspectives including- psychoanalytical, theological, existential, eco-criticism and Marxist- its philosophical depth is further illuminated through the existential framework of Jean-Paul Sartre. Jean-Paul Sartre's understanding of existence, alienation and freedom offers a compelling perspective for analyzing the novel's exploration of identity, responsibility and human suffering.

In *Being and Nothingness,* Jean-Paul Sartre emphasizes the inherent freedom and responsibility of human existence and the perpetual struggle to define oneself in a world which is devoid of predetermined essence. The realization of absolute freedom of an individual inflicts a profound sense of anguish as the individuals face the weight, responsibility and impact of their choices. *Frankenstein* illustrates these existential tensions through its central figures- Victor Frankenstein and his creation, both of whom confront the responsibility and consequences of their freedom and the anguish that arises along with it. These existential themes deeply resonate within *Frankenstein* positioning it as a precursor to the existentialist literature of the 20th century.

Although from different perspectives, both the movements/ schools of thought (i.e. Romanticism & Existentialism) emphasize the importance of individuality, subjectivity and the quest for personal authenticity. Romanticism, with its emphasis on the sublime, power of nature, turmoil of the individual laid the groundwork for existentialism which is concerned about existence, essence and freedom. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* can be interpreted as a literary work that bridges these two different movements, making the existential philosophy a coherent continuation of the past, with certain deviations in approach. This paper aims to bridge 20th century existential philosophy with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* focusing on how the novel anticipates and embodies the philosophical concerns that Jean-Paul Sartre and contemporaries like Albert Camus would later formalize. By integrating existential philosophy with the novel's gothic and romantic elements, this study highlights *Frankenstein*'s enduring relevance with the timeless human struggle for meaning, self-definition and freedom.

Literature Review

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* predates Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy by more than a century. Yet the novel's engagement with the themes of alienation, freedom, choice, responsibility and construction of selfhood deeply resonates with modern existential concerns. The novel has been widely examined through various critical lenses and themes which emphasize ambition, sublime as explored by scholars like Anne K Mellor and George Levine. Mellor's feminist reading of Frankenstein in her seminal work ***Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*** foregrounds the novel's gender politics. George Levine, in ***Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England*** posits *Frankenstein* within the context of scientific exploration and Enlightenment rationalism. Psychoanalytical readings such as Harold Bloom delves into the subconscious motivations of Victor Frankenstein, while feminist critiques like Barbara Johnson addresses the novel's subversion of gender roles and its commentary on patriarchal structures. Existentialist interpretations are less common. This research builds on the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, drawing from his *Being and Nothingness* key concepts like "existence precedes essence" as they manifest in the existential struggles of Victor and the creature.

Existential Analysis of Frankenstein

Nature of existence of Victor Frankenstein and the Monster:

"Existence precedes essence" is a line that encapsulates the whole theme of modern existential philosophy, is deeply embedded within Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. Sartre in his book *Being and Nothingness* has defined existence as an arbitrary and meaningless coincidence of being. If there is a creation, there must be a creator. The essence of the creation is clearly visualized by the creator while bringing it into existence. In a world where the creator or "God is dead" (Nietzsche,Friedrich. "*The Gay Science*"), the creation (human being) has no fundamental role or essence. Hence, human beings are in continuous struggle to make this world a meaningful place to them. Jean-Paul Sartre further elaborates that individuals are born without any significant inherent purpose in their lives and they must create their own meaning through choices and actions. The idea deeply resonates with the monster in *Frankenstein* who was created by Victor Frankenstein out of scientific ambition, without a predefined role or essence. The God-like act of Victor Frankenstein to create life, thrusts the monster into an existence where it is left alone to ponder on its own existence and define itself in a world that offers no guidance or acceptance.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existential concepts of being-in-itself (être-en-soi) and being-for- itself (être-pour-soi) provide a compelling framework for examining the transformations of both Victor Frankenstein and his Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Their journeys from unreflective existence to self-aware beings reveal the novel's exploration of consciousness, freedom, and responsibility.

Victor Frankenstein's Journey from Being-in-itself Being-for-itself:

Victor begins his journey in a state of being-in-itself, characterized by his unreflective obsession with scientific discovery. His ambition to create life is driven by a desire for power and mastery over nature, without considering the ethical ramifications. He admits, "Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world" (*Frankenstein*. p. 36). This statement reflects his objectified existence, where he focuses solely on the goal of creation, ignoring the potential consequences of his actions.

Victor's transformation into being-for-itself begins when he confronts the reality of his creation. Upon bringing the Creature to life, he experiences immediate horror and regret, stating, "I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body…but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (*Frankenstein*. p. 39). This marks the beginning of Victor's existential awakening, as he recognizes the moral and existential weight of his actions. His subsequent guilt and internal struggle signify his shift into a reflective state, acknowledging his freedom and the consequences of his choices.

The Monster's Journey from Being-in-itself to Being-for-itself:

The Creature initially exists in a state of being-in-itself, lacking consciousness or self- awareness. Its early experiences are purely sensory, as it describes, "I saw, felt, heard, and smelt at the same time; and it was, indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses". At this stage, the Creature is an object in the world, reacting instinctively to its environment without understanding its own existence.

The Creature's journey toward being-for-itself begins as it gains self-awareness and reflects on its existence. It expresses its growing consciousness and sense of alienation, stating, "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous". This realization marks the

Creature's transition to a reflective state, grappling with its identity and purpose. Its existential suffering is further articulated when it confronts Victor: "I am alone and miserable; man will not associate with me". The Creature's recognition of its freedom and the burden of its existence signify its full realization of being-for-itself.

The journeys of Victor Frankenstein and his Creature from being-in-itself to being-for- itself underscore their existential transformations and the burden of their choices. Victor's moral reckoning and the Creature's quest for identity and meaning highlight the novel's engagement with Sartrean themes of consciousness, freedom, and responsibility. Through these parallel transformations, *Frankenstein* offers a profound existential critique, emphasizing the complexities of human ambition and the search for self-awareness.

Jean-Paul Sartre's Notion of Reflective and Pre-reflective Consciousness within the Monster in *Frankenstein*

Jean-Paul Sartre's distinction between reflective and pre-reflective consciousness provides a valuable lens for analyzing the psychological and existential development of the Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Sartre's concepts highlight the Creature's journey from instinctive existence to self-awareness and introspection.

Pre-reflective Consciousness: Pre-reflective consciousness, in Sartre's philosophy, refers to the immediate, non- thematic awareness of the world. It is the basic level of consciousness where one engages with the world instinctively, without deliberate thought or self-awareness.

Initially, the Creature exists in a state of pre-reflective consciousness. It experiences the world through its senses, reacting instinctively to stimuli without a clear understanding of its own identity or existence. The Creature describes this phase of its life: "I saw, felt, heard, and smelt at the same time; and it was, indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses". Here, the Creature's consciousness is purely sensory, and it engages with the world in a direct, unmediated manner, without reflective thought.

As the Creature continues to experience the world, its interactions remain at the level of pre-reflective consciousness. It responds to its environment and attempts to fulfill basic needs, such as seeking warmth, food and shelter without conscious reflection on its actions or existence.

Reflective Consciousness:

Reflective consciousness, according to Sartre, occurs when the individual becomes aware of their own thoughts and existence. This higher level of consciousness involves self-reflection, introspection, and the thematic awareness of oneself as a subject.

The Creature's transition to reflective consciousness begins as it learns language and starts to understand the world around it. This newfound knowledge allows it to reflect on its own identity and situation. The Creature's reflective consciousness is evident when it states, "I learned that there was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death—a state which I feared yet did not understand". This moment marks the Creature's shift from merely experiencing the world to contemplating its own existence and the nature of life and death.

The full realization of reflective consciousness is apparent when the Creature reflects on its isolation and the rejection it faces from humanity. It articulates its existential anguish: "I am alone and miserable; man will not associate with me". The Creature's awareness of its alienation and its quest for identity and meaning highlight its transition from an ignorant material-like existence into an introspective being.

Bad Faith in *Frankenstein*:

Bad faith, according to Jean-Paul Sartre in Being and Nothingness, is the act of self- deception where individuals deny their existential freedom and responsibility, thereby living unauthentically. This concept involves adopting false values or conforming to societal expectations to escape the anxiety associated with freedom and the weight of personal choice.

1. Victor Frankenstein's Self-Deception: Victor engages in bad faith by denying responsibility for the consequences of his scientific ambition. He rationalizes his pursuit of knowledge as a noble endeavor, saying, "Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, 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." Here, Victor acknowledges the dangers but absolves himself by framing his actions as part of an inevitable quest, thus avoiding moral accountability.

2. The Creature's Rationalization: The creature's descent into violence is marked by bad faith as he justifies his actions through the rejection and suffering imposed upon him. He declares, "I am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind?" This statement reflects his self-deception, as he attributes his malevolence to external rejection rather than accepting his freedom to choose a different path.

3. Societal Prejudices: The society in *Frankenstein* embodies bad faith by denying the creature's humanity based solely on his appearance. The creature laments, "All men hate the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things!" This collective denial of the creature's potential for goodness allows society to avoid confronting its own moral failures and biases, sustaining an inauthentic worldview.

The Monster in *Frankenstein* as a Reflection of Camus's Sisyphus:

Albert Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus" presents the figure of Sisyphus as a symbol of human struggle against an absurd universe, characterized by the relentless repetition of a meaningless task. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the Creature's journey mirrors this existential struggle, reflecting the themes of absurdity, alienation, and the search for meaning in a hostile world. Camus describes the absurd as the conflict between humans' search for meaning and the silent, indifferent universe. Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down, embodies this eternal struggle without hope of success or escape.

Similarly, the Creature in *Frankenstein* experiences an absurd existence. Created by Victor Frankenstein and abandoned, the Creature is thrust into a world that offers no inherent meaning or acceptance. Its struggle begins with a yearning for understanding and companionship, but it is met with rejection and hostility at every turn. The Creature laments its plight: "I am alone and miserable; man will not associate with me". This rejection mirrors Sisyphus' futile efforts, as the Creature's attempts to find a place in the world are continually thwarted.

The Creature, like Sisyphus, confronts its alienation from the world. Despite its efforts to learn, communicate, and seek companionship, it remains an outsider, condemned to an existence of solitude and suffering. The Creature's realization of its perpetual isolation—"Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live?"—echoes the existential despair Camus associates with the absurd.

However, Camus asserts that true rebellion lies in acknowledging the absurd and continuing to live despite it. The Creature's persistence in seeking meaning and its demand for a companion reflect this rebellious spirit. Even in the face of constant rejection, the Creature does not surrender to despair but continues its existential quest, much like Sisyphus continually pushing the boulder.

Acceptance of the Absurd:

The Creature in *Frankenstein* serves as a reflection of Camus' Sisyphus, embodying the struggle against an indifferent world and the quest for meaning in an absurd existence. Both figures confront the futility of their circumstances with persistence and ultimately find a form of meaning in the struggle itself. Through this parallel, Mary Shelley's novel resonates with Camus's existential philosophy, highlighting the enduring human condition of seeking purpose in an incomprehensible world.

Albert Camus concludes that Sisyphus achieves a form of victory by embracing his fate and finding meaning in the struggle itself. He suggests, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy". The Creature, too, comes to a similar acceptance of its tragic existence. In its final moments, the Creature reflects on its life and the suffering it has endured, acknowledging its role in the tragic narrative: "I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct". This acceptance of its fate mirrors Sisyphus's embrace of the absurd.

Tradition and Continuity

T.S. Eliot's notion of tradition, as articulated in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", emphasizes that a poet's work does not exist in isolation but as part of a continuum, where the past is actively reshaped by the present. Eliot argues that true creativity involves a "historical sense," which entails not only awareness of the past but also a recognition of its ongoing influence. This perspective allows us to view Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a precursor to existential thought, engaging in a dynamic dialogue with Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy.

Eliot posits that the individual talent must surrender itself to this collective tradition, contributing to the continuous flow of literature. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, with its exploration of alienation, identity, and responsibility, participates in this tradition by addressing themes that later resonate in Sartre's existentialism. The Creature's alienation and Victor's ethical failures mirror existential questions about the self and moral accountability, reflecting Eliot's idea that new works must not only fit into the existing order but also alter the understanding of that order.

Eliot's belief that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" is evident in how Sartre's philosophy reframes and deepens the existential dimensions of *Frankenstein*. The novel's Romantic preoccupation with individualism and the sublime is transformed through the existential lens into a profound meditation on freedom, responsibility and the search for meaning. This interplay between past and present enriches both Shelley's work and Sartre's existential thought, demonstrating Eliot's assertion that tradition is a living, evolving entity.

In this way, *Frankenstein* contributes to the broader literary and philosophical tradition, bridging the Romantic and existentialist movements. The novel's engagement with enduring existential concerns affirms Eliot's view that the poet's role is to engage with tradition, both preserving and renewing it. Hence, the 20th century existential philosophy is nothing drastically new from its historical background but it is a coherent continuation and modification of Romantic themes.

Conclusion

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* offers a rich tapestry for exploring existential themes, making it a precursor of existentialist literature of the 20th century. By applying Jean-Paul Sartre's existential framework, the paper uncovers deeper insights into the novel's portrayal of alienation, freedom, responsibility and the quest for self-definition. Both Victor Frankenstein and the Creature embody the existential struggles of being, navigating the tensions between existence and essence, freedom and anguish, and authenticity and bad faith.

Sartre's notions of being-in-itself and being-for-itself illuminate the characters' psychological transformations, highlighting their journeys from unreflective existence to self-aware beings burdened with existential responsibility. The application of Sartre's concept of bad faith further underscores the

moral and ethical failures of the characters, as they grapple with the consequences of their actions and their attempts to evade responsibility. Moreover, the Creature's experience as a reflection of Camus's Sisyphus emphasizes the absurdity of its existence and its persistent, albeit futile, quest for meaning in a hostile world.

Through this existential lens, *Frankenstein* not only anticipates the philosophical concerns of existentialism but also enriches our understanding of the novel's enduring relevance in exploring the complexities of the human condition. The novel's engagement with these themes exemplifies T.S. Eliot's idea of tradition and continuity, where past and present literary works engage in a dynamic dialogue, reshaping each other in the process.

In conclusion, Frankenstein stands as a profound meditation on the existential dilemmas of human existence, offering timeless reflections on freedom, identity, and the human struggle for meaning. By bridging the Romantic and existentialist traditions, Mary Shelley's work continues to resonate with contemporary readers and scholars, inviting us to confront the profound questions of our own existence and the ethical responsibilities that come with our freedom.

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