



The Cost of Exploration: The Age of Exploration Metaphor in *Frankenstein*

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Abstract

By analyzing the dual narratives of Frankenstein's scientific exploration and Walton's geographical expedition in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the study points out that Frankenstein's experiment to create life and Walton's Arctic expedition replicate the ambition of conquering the unknown during the Age of Exploration, but lead to disaster due to the neglect of ethical responsibility. This mirrors the costs of resource plunder and ecological destruction in colonial expansion. Frankenstein's act of manipulating life with corpses as "resources" analogizes the instrumental rationality of colonizers who treated the New World as an exploitable object, exposing the ethical vacuum when science becomes a tool of power. Through the dual narratives, Shelley warns that the civilizational progress promoted by the Age of Exploration was essentially built on systematic exploitation and ecological crises. The novel not only reflects on the scientific mania of the Industrial Revolution but also reveals the deep logic of colonial expansion: the conquest of the "unknown" without ethical constraints will ultimately lead to self-destruction.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Frankenstein, The Age of Exploration, Mary Shelly

1. Introduction

The Age of Discovery refers to the exploration and colonial expansion of the unknown territory of the world by European countries from the 15th century to the 18th century. During this period, with the development of navigational technology, cartography and astronomy, Europe gradually opened up an unprecedented

global perspective. Portugal and Spain were the first to sail to the New World and the coasts of Asia, followed by the Netherlands, Britain and France, opening up a “new world” of sea and land.

The exploration of the Age of Discovery was not only a geographical discovery, but also a profound scientific, cultural and political transformation, accompanied by the rise of Eurocentrism, the plundering of resources, and the conquest of unknown civilizations. While the spirit of exploration in this era promoted the progress of human civilization, it also laid hidden dangers for later colonialism and imperialism. Scientific discoveries and geographical expansion are intertwined to form a historical process with far-reaching implications.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is a classic of English Romantic literature, written in the early 19th century, centuries after the Age of Discovery, but its profound cultural metaphors and historical reflections are still closely linked to this period. Although *Frankenstein* directly reflects the early days of the Industrial Revolution, there is a significant connection between the theme of “exploration” explored in the novel and the spirit of exploration in the Age of Discovery. The main characters in the novel, Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton, represent the limits of individual scientific exploration and the adventure of collective geographical exploration, respectively, both of which reflect the fearless pursuit of the unknown.

However, the novel’s narrative also clearly illustrates the ethical dilemmas, environmental catastrophes, and political metaphors that come with this exploration. That is, the exploration of the Age of Discovery is not only a geographical expansion, but also a challenge to the boundaries of human understanding. The discovery of the New World and the conquest of the outside world brought unparalleled wealth and power to Europe, while also revealing the destruction of the culture of the “other” and the misunderstanding of the unknown. Cultural themes of the Age of Discovery, such as geographical exploration, scientific curiosity, and colonial expansion, profoundly influenced subsequent Western patterns of thought and behavior. These themes have strong metaphors and echoes in *Frankenstein*, showing that while science and exploration promote civilization, they also expose the blind spots of human morality and the crisis of ethics.

So, how do cultural themes such as geographical exploration, scientific curiosity, and colonial expansion from the Age of Discovery manifest themselves in *Frankenstein*? How does *Frankenstein* reflect on the ethical dilemmas, environmental disasters, and political metaphors of the spirit of exploration in the Age of Discovery, through the narrative of Walton and Victor? What does Mary Shelley want to remind us of through this work? This will be the focus of my essay.

To interrogate these questions, this essay will employ a postcolonial critical framework to unpack the novel’s metaphors of colonial expansion, the conquest of the unknown, and the problematic construction of the monstrous “Other” as a reflection of indigenous peoples encountered by European explorers. It will further incorporate an ecocritical perspective to examine themes of environmental exploitation and nature’s backlash--themes that parallel the ecological costs of co-

lonial resource plunder. Finally, ethical criticism will provide a lens through which to evaluate the central moral failure of both Victor and Walton: the pursuit of knowledge and glory devoid of ethical responsibility.

This essay argues that through the dual narratives of Walton's geographical expedition and Frankenstein's scientific exploration, the novel reveals the inherent cost of colonial-style exploration since the Age of Discovery: when the desire to conquer the unknown operates without ethical constraints, it inevitably leads to the oppression of the "Other," ecological destruction, and ultimately, self-annihilation.

2. *Frankenstein* and the Spirit of Exploration in the Age of Discovery

2.1. Explore the Unknown

The Age of Exploration, from the end of the 15th century to the 18th century, European opened the door to globalization through navigation and geographical exploration. During this period, explorers such as Columbus and Magellan embarked on the most influential expeditions in history, which not only revealed the New World and uncharted seas, but also brought abundant resources and wealth to Europe. However, as *Frankenstein* reveals, the expansion of exploration and knowledge was accompanied by the plundering of newly conquered lands, the oppression of indigenous peoples, and the destruction of the natural environment. It is in this historical context that Europeans' exploration of the unknown has brought pride and wealth, but also triggered profound ethical and social reflection.

In *Frankenstein*, the quest for exploration and knowledge becomes one of the central themes of the novel. The two protagonists of the novel, Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein, embody two typical "great voyage" spirit of exploration. Walton, an adventurous navigator, decided to travel to the North Pole in search of new shipping routes, hoping to discover areas that had not yet been conquered by man, and ultimately bring "great discoveries" to the world. At the beginning of the novel, he writes to his sister about his desire to explore the unknown: "Isn't the pursuit of great goals against all odds the noblest trait of mankind?" [1] (Shelley 19). Walton sees the Arctic as the ultimate frontier for man's conquest of nature, expressing a ambition that mirrors the Age of Exploration: "I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man" [1] (Shelley 15). And this spirit of exploration coincides with that of navigators such as Columbus and Magellan in the Age of Discovery, who sought to break through the boundaries of geography and knowledge and discover new horizons.

In contrast to Walton's explorations, Victor Frankenstein's explorations are adventures in the field of science. Victor's research intention is to unravel the mysteries of life, grasp the power of life and death through his own experiments, and create life. However, just as Walton's seafaring adventure ultimately failed, so did

Victor's scientific experiments. Victor tries to create a life by scientific means by stealing the "resources" of the corpse, and this violation of the laws of nature makes the relationship between him and the monster more complicated. Like the navigators of the Age of Discovery, Victor's exploration is also full of greed and adventurous spirit, and his conquest is not only the expansion of knowledge, but also the domination of nature and life. Both ignore the ethical responsibilities behind the exploration, ultimately leading to irreparable disaster.

Through the characters of Walton and Victor, Mary Shelley critically reveals the negative aspects of the spirit of "exploration". Although the explorers of the Age of Discovery, although they made great contributions to the expansion of scientific and geographical knowledge, their conquests were often accompanied by the plunder and oppression of colonies and indigenous peoples. Similarly, Victor neglected the bottom line of ethics in his pursuit of scientific knowledge, which ultimately led not only to the birth of the monster, but also to the destruction of his own life and the lives of those around him. Walton's expedition to the North Pole is a further extension of this theme, as he endured great pain and danger during the expedition, eventually realizing that excessive pursuit of great things could lead to destruction. As he wrote in the letter: "I am so persistent in my quest that if I do not succeed, the price will be too much for me to bear" [1] (Shelley 25).

2.2. The Intersection of Science and Geographical Exploration

In the Age of Discovery, geographical exploration was closely related to the scientific revolution, and the development of astronomy, cartography, botany and other disciplines not only broadened the boundaries of human knowledge, but also provided an important theoretical basis for colonial expansion. Through the exploration of the New World, Europeans were able to measure, classify, and define natural resources more precisely, while providing a scientific basis for further colonization and expansion. However, this scientific exploration was also used as a tool for colonization, helping European countries conquer and control distant lands and peoples through surveying, mapping, etc. In this context, scientific and geographical exploration became closely linked double-edged swords, promoting globalization on the one hand and colonialism on the other.

There is a deep connection between the scientific experiments in *Frankenstein* and the geographical exploration of the Age of Discovery. Victor Frankenstein's scientific experiments symbolize the "intrusion" into the natural world. Through the dissection and reorganization of corpses, he tried to create a new life form, and this manipulation and transformation of life is similar to the conquest of the New World by Europeans during the Age of Discovery. Not only do they discover new lands through exploration, but they also try to give them new identities and meanings by naming and classifying.

Similarly, Victor's encroachment on the laws of nature exemplifies how scientific inquiry can be a tool for gaining power. In the novel, Victor's scientific experiments are not only a challenge to the laws of nature, but also a domination of

human life, fundamentally testing and blurring the very categories of the natural and the artificial. As Timothy Morton argues, *Frankenstein* is a “deconstructive work of art” that “does not get rid of categories. Instead, it tests these categories to breaking point so that they start to speak their paradoxes and absurdities” [2] (Morton 145). Victor’s act of creating the Creature serves as the ultimate test of the category of nature, producing a being that is neither purely natural nor entirely artificial. He admits his obsession with power: “A new species would bless me as its creator and source...No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs” [1] (Shelley 54). Victor obtains scientific breakthroughs by controlling the bodies of the dead as a resource, an act that bears a clear resemblance to the plundering of colonial resources by colonists, and one that is made possible by a similar mindset that seeks to dominate and reclassify the world according to its own instrumental logic.

However, just as the exploration of the Age of Discovery was not without its costs, Victor’s experiments also had disastrous consequences without ethical considerations. When he succeeded in creating the monster, he immediately abandoned it and threw his creation into a world of hostility and fear. The existence of the monster is both the product of scientific experiments and a symbol of the consequences of Victor’s disregard for its creation. As Victor said, “I didn’t take responsibility for my creation” [1] (Shelley 59). This statement is not only a critique of the lack of ethical restraint in scientific inquiry, but also a metaphor for a practice of colonial expansion: ignoring the consequences of conquest and plunder.

During the Age of Discovery, the Arctic was a mysterious and seductive place. It represents the limits of human exploration, both a challenge to the unknown and a test of human courage and technology. Although the extreme environment and unpredictable dangers of the Arctic have repeatedly failed many explorers, it still attracts the attention of countless people. In Walton’s expedition to the North Pole, the Arctic is not only the ultimate goal of scientific exploration, but also symbolizes humanity’s desire for limits and the constant quest for knowledge and conquest.

Walton’s expedition to the North Pole has a double symbolism in *Frankenstein*. The Arctic, as a symbol of the “unknown frontier”, represents humanity’s desire to explore its limits. Walton’s desire to conquer the Arctic and make scientific discoveries is very similar to the mindset of the explorers of the Age of Discovery. However, just as the exploration of the Age of Discovery had its glorious side and its profound negative effects, Walton’s expedition to the Arctic ultimately did not bring glory, but revealed the danger and emptiness behind the exploration. At the end of *Frankenstein*, Walton realizes that the North Pole he seeks is not a source of glory, but a source of endless death and emptiness. “I used to be proud of great things, but now I realize that excessive exploration can only lead to destruction,” [1] he reflected. (Shelley 196) This ending implies that the endless quest for the unknown often leads to human self-destruction. Victor’s death, and Walton’s abandonment of extreme exploration, reveal the dual nature of exploration in the

Age of Discovery: both brilliant discoveries and unbearable costs.

As the ultimate frontier of the Age of Discovery, the Arctic symbolizes mankind's infinite thirst for knowledge. However, the ultimate result of this desire is not glory, but self-destruction. This echoes the history of colonial expansion, where colonists gained wealth and resources through the conquest of the New World, but behind this conquest was the plundering of indigenous cultures and environments, which ultimately led to irreparable historical trauma and consequences.

In *Frankenstein*, the intersection of science and geography forms a profound critique of modern society, politics, and ethics. The pursuit of science and knowledge, without the support of ethics and responsibility, will eventually spiral out of control. Through Victor's failure, the novel reveals the duality of knowledge and power: science, as an instrument of power, can be used to dominate nature and others, but without moral restraint, the consequences are catastrophic. Victor's defeat and the monster's revenge reveal the moral degradation and environmental catastrophe that can come with the mere pursuit of knowledge.

Through the narratives of Walton and Victor, *Frankenstein* reveals the profound problem behind the spirit of exploration in the Age of Discovery: the expansion of scientific and geographical exploration has not only brought about the progress of human civilization, but also exposed the blindness and lack of ethics of human conquest of the unknown. The novel reflects on the dangers of science as an instrument of power, and warns that people must maintain an ethical bottom line in the pursuit of knowledge, otherwise the result can be an unbearable disaster. Walton's expedition to the North Pole ultimately led to a failure and a deep reflection on the purpose of exploration, and Victor's abandonment of the monster also led us to reflect on the potential for the destruction of humanity without careful consideration of the environmental and ethical consequences of scientific exploration.

Overall, Mary Shelley explores the complexity of the spirit of exploration in the Age of Discovery through the characters of Walton and Victor. Through her novels, she reflects on the negative effects of colonization and conquest in the Age of Discovery, and extends this impact to scientific exploration and the construction of modern knowledge systems. While scientific and geographical exploration is advancing human civilization, we must also be vigilant against the ethical crisis and environmental consequences behind it. In the pursuit of knowledge, it is necessary to be aware of the potentially catastrophic consequences of human intervention in the natural world, and that the cost of exploration is not only material, but also moral and ecological.

3. *Frankenstein* and the Colonial Metaphor of the Age of Discovery

Frankenstein is not only a profound exploration of science and geography, but also a colonial metaphor and ethical crisis of the spirit of exploration in the Age

of Discovery. The characters and plots in the novels are often full of colonial metaphors, especially the interaction between scientific exploration and the geographical expansion of the Age of Discovery. This section will focus on how the novel reflects on the ethical consequences of colonial expansion, especially the absence of science, the environment, and social responsibility, through the construction of the “other”, the abandonment of scientific inquiry, and the Arctic as a symbol of the ultimate “frontier of exploration”.

3.1. The Metaphor of the “Other” and Colonial Expansion

During the Age of Discovery, the conquest of the New World was achieved by European through navigation and geographical exploration. This conquest is not limited to the expansion of physical space, but also includes the construction and definition of the “other”. Explorers often saw the newly discovered land and its inhabitants as the “other”, and in the process of exploring the new world, they gradually shaped a worldview dominated by the image of the barbarian and the uncivilized “other”. “They are a hopelessly timid people...they are so unsuspecting and so generous with what they possess...They never refuse anything that is asked for.” [3] (Columbus 389). In the letter announcing his discovery, Columbus depicted the indigenous people he encountered as a naive, timid, and almost foolishly generous nation. They were described as utterly defenseless and willing to offer everything they had to the Europeans upon request. Such a portrayal itself constitutes an act of othering, defining them as childish beings in need of guidance and exploitation, thereby justifying subsequent colonial possession.

This process of creating a subordinate and inferior “Other” to define and bolster the European self finds its profound theoretical explanation in Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism. Said argues that the Orient was constructed as Europe’s contrasting image, stating, “The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” [4] (Said 1-2).

In a parallel manner, the indigenous peoples of the New World were cast into the role of this “Other,” serving as a foil against which European identity—as rational, Christian, and civilized—could be measured and affirmed. These “othernesses” are considered to be objects to be conquered and transformed by civilized societies, just as colonial expansion in the Age of Discovery was often accompanied by the oppression and destruction of indigenous cultures, religions, and ecology.

There is a similar construction of the “other” in *Frankenstein*, especially through the creation of the image of the monster. The monster is the product of Victor Frankenstein’s scientific experiments, and it is a non-human existence, which has a certain human quality, but is also full of alienated horror and strange-

ness. The monster's appearance, behavior, and inner loneliness make it the "other" created by Victor. It poignantly describes its own isolation: "I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept" [1] (Shelley 105). It is both a by-product of scientific exploration and a symbol of the lack of moral responsibility to humanity.

In the novel, the monster narrates, "I am a created exile, abandoned in a world to which I cannot belong." [1] (Shelley 111) reveals that monster was neither cared for nor accepted as human beings when it was created. Its alienation and isolation coincide with the construction of the "other" in the Age of Discovery. The "other" in colonial expansion is often regarded as a barbaric and uncivilized existence, and the monster is a by-product of the barbarism brought about by Victor's scientific experiments, which can neither understand the moral code of human beings nor integrate into human society, and this alienation makes it gradually develop its own value system and revenge.

The monster is not only the consequence of the scientist Victor's failure to control and take responsibility, but also symbolizes the alienation and abandonment of the "other" by Europeans in the Age of Discovery. During the Age of Discovery, colonists often neglected and destroyed the culture, identity, and ecology of the indigenous peoples after conquering new lands. Similarly, Victor, after creating the monster, abandoned it and failed to take responsibility for his actions, an act of abandonment that allowed the monster to eventually develop into a force for revenge, similar to the resistance of the oppressed in colonial history.

3.2. The Backlash of Colonial Expansion

Colonists in the Age of Discovery, after acquiring wealth and resources, often did not take into account the long-term effects of their actions on indigenous peoples and the environment. Colonial expansion brought not only the conquest of the New World, but also the plundering of land and culture, the destruction of the ecological environment, and the destruction of the social structure of the indigenous peoples. In the wake of this plunder and oppression, the colonizers treated indigenous peoples as "other" and neglected their culture and values, often leading to revolt and violence with far-reaching consequences.

In *Frankenstein*, Victor's actions reflect a similar pattern of colonization. Through the dissection and reorganization of corpses, he tried to dominate the natural world and create life, but he neglected respect for nature and bioethics. What's more, after he succeeded in creating the monster, he abandoned it and placed his creation in a hostile world. The monster gradually develops a motive for revenge in the rejection of society, which eventually destroys Victor. The monster's depravity and act of revenge is a response to Victor's abandonment. When Victor refuses to acknowledge the monster's existence and abandons it, the monster falls into loneliness and despair, and this isolation allows it to gradually develop violent tendencies. In the process of revenge on Victor, the monster embod-

ies the final rebellion of the oppressed and deprived “other”. The monster said, “You gave me life, but you didn’t give me love. What you have given me is pain, and my vengeance will be destruction” [1] (Shelley 130).

This act of revenge alludes to the backlash of colonization and scientific expansion: on the one hand, colonists and scientists gain control and power in the process of conquest or exploration, but on the other hand, they also ignore the reactions and consequences of the vanquished or created. In the process of colonial expansion, the plundering of indigenous culture and environment by European powers eventually triggered a revolt by the indigenous peoples, which strongly echoed the monster’s revenge on Victor.

From the point of view of ecocriticism, Victor’s actions are not only an embodiment of anthropocentrism, but also a deprivation of the natural world and biodiversity. Victor tried to “control” life by changing nature of his own will through scientific experiments, but he neglected respect for natural ethics, which eventually led to the rebellion and destruction of the natural world. Similarly, the plundering of the resources of the New World and the destruction of ecosystems by the colonizers eventually brought irreversible losses and rebellions [5] (Bravo 45).

4. Limitations of the Study

However, this essay has certain limitations. Firstly, the textual analysis in this paper is primarily based on a specific edition of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (Penguin, 1996), and all citations and page references are from this version; therefore, there may be slight variations when referencing other editions. Secondly, although this study attempts to use the metaphor of the Age of Exploration to reveal the costs of colonial expansion, it mainly focuses on scientific and geographical exploration within the British imperial context, without fully comparing the differences in exploration and colonial models of other contemporary colonial empires (such as Spain and Portugal). This may, to some extent, oversimplify the complexity and diversity of colonialism.

Furthermore, although the characterizations of Frankenstein as a Swiss scientist and Walton as a British explorer are representative, the narrative remains largely from a Eurocentric perspective, with limited reflection on non-Western viewpoints. These limitations also open avenues for further research, such as incorporating more diverse postcolonial theories or cross-cultural comparative perspectives to deepen the understanding of the imperial metaphors in the novel.

5. Conclusions

The exploration of the Age of Discovery is not only a geographical expansion, but also a challenge to the boundaries of human understanding. The discovery of the New World and the conquest of the outside world brought unparalleled wealth and power to Europe, while also revealing the destruction of the culture of the “other” and the misunderstanding of the unknown. Cultural themes of the Age of Discovery, such as geographical exploration, scientific curiosity, and colonial ex-

pansion, profoundly influenced subsequent Western patterns of thought and behavior. These themes have strong metaphors and echoes in *Frankenstein*, showing that while science and exploration promote civilization, they also expose the blind spots of human morality and the crisis of ethics.

First of all, the two characters of Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton represent two typical spirits of exploration: one is a pioneer of science and the other is an adventurer of geography. Walton represents the spirit of the navigator of the Age of Discovery, who searched for uncharted shipping lanes in the Arctic and dreamed of bringing “great discoveries” to humanity. This extreme desire to explore is not only a curiosity about the unknown, but also a pursuit of personal glory and historical status. In contrast to Walton’s exploration, Victor Frankenstein’s exploration is a more introverted and focused scientific pursuit. Through a series of experiments, he tried to unravel the mysteries of life, challenge the laws of nature, and create a new life form. Although the two explore in different directions, the motivation behind them is similar: the conquest of the unknown is ultimately disastrous because they ignore the ethical responsibilities that come with exploration.

However, the exploration in *Frankenstein* is not only geographical and scientific, it is also a question of the behavior of Western colonizers and their moral boundaries. Through the adventures of the two characters, Walton and Victor, the novel reflects the excessive desire for the unknown and the disregard for ethical consequences in the Age of Discovery and beyond. Walton’s extreme spirit of exploration not only reflects the adventurous spirit of the navigators of the Age of Discovery, but also hints at the potentially devastating consequences of such exploration. Victor’s scientific experiments reveal a deeper theme: that scientific progress can transcend the boundaries of human morality and lead to unforeseen and catastrophic consequences. This exploration not only affects the course of individual lives, but also reveals broader social and environmental issues, such as the plundering and destruction of colonial lands, resources and their people during the Age of Discovery.

More profoundly, the novel’s depiction of the “other” echoes the colonial metaphor of the Age of Discovery. In *Frankenstein*, the monster, as a product of scientific experiments, represents a created “other” that is both the embodiment of human ambition and an existence that cannot be understood and accepted. The image of the monster resembles the indigenous peoples encountered by the colonists of the Age of Discovery--strange, barbaric, and unknowable, but with its own logic and existence. Just as the colonizers deprived the conquered people of their rights and identities, the monster was deprived of his due emotions and humanity in Victor’s experiments, and eventually turned to violence and revenge.

In summary, *Frankenstein* deeply reflects on the ethical dilemmas, environmental disasters, and political metaphors brought about by the spirit of exploration in the Age of Discovery, through the narrative of Walton and Victor. The metaphors of scientific experiments and geographical exploration in the novel not

only show the desire for the unknown, but also reveal the possible negative consequences of exploration. Through this work, Mary Shelley reminds us that while the spirit of exploration has advanced human civilization, it must also be accompanied by responsible and ethical considerations, otherwise the cost of exploration can be unbearable. Building on the experience of exploration in the Age of Discovery, *Frankenstein* asks us the eternal question: are humans ready to bear the consequences of challenging the natural world and social order?

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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