

Frankenstein and Ackroyd: a Study of the Text as the Monster

Anish Bhattacharyya

Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Adamas University.

Orcid: 0000-0001-8104-2752. Email: anishbhattacharyya@gmail.com

Received January 16, 2018; Revised May 20, 2018; Accepted May 21, 2018; Published May 26, 2018.

Abstract

There have been several retellings of the *Frankenstein* narrative since its publication. Peter Ackroyd's rendition of the same was published in 2008 under the title, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*. The text attempts to look at Mary Shelley's narrative from a different perspective, rather than simply reiterating the events in a familiar way. It employs the historical fictional mode of storytelling. This paper attempts to study the role of Ackroyd as a reader, author and manipulator of history. It will also strive to understand the politics behind Ackroyd's attempted resurrection of Shelley, Byron, Polidori and Mary Shelley as his characters. The goal is to comprehend, how Ackroyd's voice functions within this cacophony of voices.

Keywords: rhizome, author, reader, historiographic metafiction, discourse, unreliability.

1.0 Introduction:

This research analysis, attempts to study the contemporary retelling of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and for that, I have chosen Peter Ackroyd's *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* for that purpose. I would like to employ the concept of 'rhizome', as proposed by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to study the intricacies of Peter Ackroyd's narrative. Ackroyd is a renowned author of biographies of English authors and poets. However, he is also an established writer in the genre of historical fiction. *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* takes off in the manner of the historical narrative, however Ackroyd deviates from the genre towards the end. This paper would like to argue that Ackroyd, in the course of the narrative, shifts from the genre of 'historical fiction' to that of the 'historiographic metafiction' and in the end perhaps comes up with altogether something different.

This intended research analysis would borrow the theoretical lens provided by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, as already mentioned, in order to locate Ackroyd's text in the *Frankenstein* discourse. I would also keep in close proximity, Barthes's idea on the 'author' and his subsequent 'death'. It is needless to say that it adds a theoretical as well as literary flare to a subject dealing with death, attempted resurrection and its aftermath. Finally this paper will study whether Ackroyd's narrative conforms to the idea of Barthes as expressed in his essay, "Death of the Author", where he prophetically claims that the death of the author is marked by the birth of the 'reader'.

Selections of Ackroyd's text will be analyzed in the course of the paper to unearth his own critical perspectives to understand his conformity or deviation from the popular theoretical apparatuses. Ackroyd's occupation and interest in the stalwarts of English literature makes his work an ideal subject to study the above mentioned interaction between literature and theory. In

a way, Ackroyd's work, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* then becomes an experimental site where history, fiction and imagination combine.

1.1 Rhizome like Narratives of a Mother Narrative

Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari make two relevant observations in their work, "A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia". They state that:

There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made. Therefore a book also has no object. As an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs But when one writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work. (p.1602).

First, what really interests me is the fact that they dismantle any difference between a book and how its author creates it. The narrative then becomes an assemblage of information, filtered by the author's imagination. Deleuze and Guattari speaks of how a book is connected to other books to form several rhizome like connections. This is further affirmed by the fact that the *Frankenstein* narrative is one of the most imitated narrative of the 20th and 21st centuries. The popularity is such that even DC Comics did not hesitate to reimagine a Batman origin story in the form of Victor Frankenstein. It was published under the name of *Batman Castle of the Bat* in 1999 and the narrative is set in 1819. More recently, James McAvoy is starred as Victor Frankenstein in the eponymous movie, which is directed by Paul McGuigan in 2015. These plethora of retelling the Frankenstein myth is thus rightly described by Caroline Joan S. Picart as "hideous progeny. . . [invoking emotions ranging] from fear, terror, and awe to laughter, ridicule, ironic sympathy, and distance" (pp.1).

Ackroyd who is an established biographer and specializes in London studies, also attempts a retelling of the *Frankenstein* narrative in 2008. His expertise in the field of the historical novel thus motivates him to recall several figures like that of P. B. Shelley, Mary Shelley, Lord Byron and Doctor Polidori from the dead to introduce them as living characters within his narrative. If seen from this perspective, Ackroyd's narrative is another rhizome like multiplication of the mother narrative of Mary Shelley. However, Ackroyd's narrative fulfils the second criteria provided by Deleuze and Guattari which the other retellings do not take into account. Ackroyd's narrative is a master axle which can be plugged into other axles to make a giant machine. This is the second point proposed by Deleuze and Guattari and it represents how the literary machine can become a jack of all trades. Ackroyd fuses historical facts with imagination, along with the popular *Frankenstein* narrative to create his own 'promethean' literary machine.

Ackroyd's narrative is highly intertextual and it shows a keen awareness of its artificial nature. It validates its existence within the already fictitious *Frankenstein* discourse by alluding to the romantic ideals of imagination. Ackroyd depicts an episode where Victor Frankenstein is listening to Coleridge's lecture on 'primary imagination'. Ackroyd's Coleridge borrows some extracts from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's original lectures delivered in Oxford. Ackroyd's narrator says, "The primary imagination," Coleridge said, "I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a representation in the finite mind of the eternal creation." (p. 74). Ackroyd's Coleridge also states that, "everything has a life of its own, and we are all *one life*" (p.74). Victor Frankenstein is intrigued by this lecture and expresses his conviction that he must learn to restore a corpse to life. He believes that his imagination holds the key to unlocking the secrets of life and death. This episode also serves another higher purpose. Victor Frankenstein not

only reiterates his thoughts, but he also expresses Ackroyd's belief in the idea of "one life". In this fiction, just like his protagonist, he undertakes the task of reanimating a bygone ("dead" if I may say) narrative with the "one life". This "one life" thus becomes what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the "tap root" (p.1603) system of the mother plant, which is no longer visible, but it nevertheless reanimates other plants, which are actually rhizomes, with the same life force. They say, "The principal root has aborted, or its tip has been destroyed; an immediate, indefinite multiplicity of secondary roots grafts onto it and undergoes a flourishing development" (p.1604).

This pattern is followed by every retelling of the *Frankenstein* mother narrative and Ackroyd's retelling not only serves as a prime example, but it also validates the theoretical apparatus backing it. Coleridge, Frankenstein, Deleuze and Guattari, Mary Shelley and Ackroyd all come together in the "fascicular" (p.1603) narrative which is the object of study in this paper. The question which arises at this juncture is whose voice dominates the narrative.

2.0 Death of the Authors?

The cacophony of voices is another identifiable characteristic of any postmodern narrative. Intertextuality and the rhizome like qualities of contemporary narratives ensure and encourage this cacophony. If Barthes is to be believed, this cacophony is beyond the control of the author and is wholly dependent on the reader. The reader becomes the vessel of meaning-making by displacing the author. What I would like to point out is the fact that even though the author loses his grasp on the text, yet his imagination is the text as we have already seen, when discussing about Deleuze and Guattari. There is essentially no difference between the text and the author's imagination. Thus a question arises, whether the author has any role in fine tuning the cacophonies of other voices apart from his own.

2.1 Purpose of the Historical Fiction Genre

While constructing any work pertaining to the *Frankenstein* mythos, the first voice which comes into account is that of Mary Shelley. Ackroyd faces a similar challenge. The reader who is already familiar with Mary Shelley's work approaches the text with a preconceived idea. Therefore, Ackroyd's chosen form of the historical fiction claims to add a sort of greater authenticity to his narrative than Mary Shelley's, in the mind of the imaginative reader. Furthermore, the very assimilation of Mary Shelley as a character in the narrative adds a certain degree of legitimacy to his narrative. In this way, he manages to place himself on a vantage point which was unavailable to Mary Shelley.

Ackroyd's narrative even attempts to reject Mary Shelley's position as the creator of the *Frankenstein* mythos. Ackroyd devices Harriet Westbrook (P. B. Shelley's first wife) as the first victim of the 'monster'. Mary Shelley is the fifth person in Ackroyd's narrative to have seen the creature. The very title of Ackroyd's work also aims at a similar goal. The concluding departure from Mary Shelley's narrative of this paper also fulfils a similar purpose.

Ackroyd's great reveal in the end, discovered from Frankenstein's 'casebook' which dates back to November 15, 1822, juxtaposes Victor Frankenstein as both the man as well as the monster in the manner of Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). It is his attempt to show that his Frankenstein's narrative thematically precedes both Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. He carefully destabilizes the argument that Mary Shelley's narrative precedes his, by categorically stating how Mary Shelley as a character only understood a glimpse of Frankenstein and the latter's manual thus gains more

narrative legitimacy. In a way he reduces the original work to an imperfect copy. For instance, the episode where the monster confronts Frankenstein asking for a bride and when the latter denies its request, it says, “No. I will not be with you always. I will not be with you often. But when you are least ready, then I will be there. What if I were to appear on your wedding night?” (p.175). This exchange is very similar to Mary Shelley’s narrative. However, the similarity only serves as a tactic to marginalize the voice of the original author to the periphery.

2.2 Unreliability of the Narrator

Ackroyd’s attempt of transcending the authorial voices of the past is however not an effort in isolation. He realizes that being a writer of posterity, it is perhaps not in his command to fully displace the voices of the writers of his previous generations, and especially when dealing with a topic which has undergone several retellings in one form or another, all across the world. He instead tries to plant a seed of doubt within his readers towards his narrator, who also happens to be the titular character.

The novel is presented to the readers in the form of a first person narrative of Victor Frankenstein, depicting certain episodes of relevance, according to the narrator. Later it is revealed that the ‘casebook’ containing all the scribbling of the titular character is presented to “Fredrick Newman, Superintendent of the Hoxton Mental Asylum for the Incurables” (p.279). This sudden, yet final development in the narrative posits serious questions before the readers.

The readers are left to wonder about the exact point in the narrative after which Frankenstein develops this schism within his psyche. The readers are not sure whether it is after the death of his sister and father, or perhaps is it after his dear friend Bysshe’s ‘betrayal’. If that is the case, perhaps it explains the monster’s, or perhaps Frankenstein’s loathing of Harriet Westbrook Shelley and later Mary Shelley. However, one may also doubt, whether Ackroyd’s Frankenstein if at all knew Shelley, Mary and Byron. If such is the case, then Percy Bysshe Shelley, Byron and Mary Shelley become the figments of his imagination. Whatever these characters are saying or doing are extensions of Victor Frankenstein’s psyche. It is only then that the reader agrees with Dr. Polidori’s conclusion that, “Perhaps you wished to rival Bysshe. Or Byron. You had longings for sublimity or power.” (p.278).

Victor Frankenstein then becomes an ardent romantic artist attempting to defy his contemporaries. And, similarly Ackroyd becomes a modern Prometheus who wishes to steal the fire of the romantic ‘demi gods’ of English literature. Ackroyd’s efforts for legitimacy is challenged by himself and this in turn makes him a contemporary romantic. He imagines and literally creates the figures of the romantic artists.

2.3 Historiographic Metafiction

Ackroyd acknowledges the death of the romantic authors, yet he undertakes the task of reading their works and resurrects them in his fiction. They often utter the same words, or perform the same tasks which have been historically accepted to have been performed by them. Shelley for instance, goes to Oxford and is unceremoniously expelled for writing the pamphlet, “On the Necessity of Atheism”. The text also presents the interaction between Byron, Shelley, Polidori and Mary Shelley, where everyone decides to write a tale of terror – “It was agreed between us that, over the next two or three days, each of us would prepare a tale of terror which would then be read aloud.” (p.239). The incident which is traditionally accepted to be the inception of the idea of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, is assimilated within the narrative of Ackroyd.

Ackroyd then initially undertakes the role of the reader and assimilates everything the author function has to offer. He incorporates his own imagination with the signified and in a Frankensteinian manner creates a new text. The text is his own, yet not in its entirety. It belongs to the genre of historical fiction, yet it is constantly aware of its status as fiction. The character of P. B. Shelley for instance undergoes radical changes. He started as a symbol of liberty, but gradually declines into a character quarrelling with Byron over his reception of verses. He even starts anticipating his own death. Mary Shelley is only endowed with the quality of words at her disposal. Her character is bereft of imagination and the text does not provide a single instance, where her artistic flare is discussed. Lord Byron for instance comments on Mary Shelley to his companion, Dr. Polidori, ““She has two faults unpardonable in a woman,” Byron was saying. “She can read and she can write.”” (p.247). However in reality Peter Cochran notes that Byron did not say this about Mary Shelley, instead he had commented the same about Caroline Cameron to Hobhouse.

Another noteworthy moment which can be found in the text is when the monster encounters Frankenstein. The monster asks him, “Did I ask you to mould me? Did I solicit you to take me from the darkness?” (p.156). Frankenstein simply feels pity for the monster, but it is only in a latter scene, when Byron recites the following lines, that he remembers that they belong to *Paradise Lost* - “Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?” (p.248). Nowhere does the monster, or Frankenstein mentions in Ackroyd’s narrative that the monster found a copy of *Paradise Lost* in a leather case (which happens in Mary Shelley’s narrative (p.93)), yet the monster utters these words. This further strengthens the metafictional and intertextual nature of the text.

Facts are therefore twisted by Ackroyd in the course of crafting his historiographic metafiction. For instance, the text speaks of every romantic poet, but it does not discuss, John Keats. Instead, Victor Frankenstein meets the corpse of Jack Keat. Jack Keat is experimented upon and reanimated after his death. It is later revealed that there is no Jack Keat, but the monster had been a persona of Frankenstein.

It is fascinating to note that, John Keats speaks at length about ‘negative capability’ and how a good artist will differ from the virtuous philosopher. He stresses how an artist should not hesitate to present a character who does not conform to his world view. And that is the quality of Victor Frankenstein, the artist. He successfully creates an alter ego, who does not conform to his ideals. He initially rejects his creation, but later accepts his responsibility. In other words, he manages to empty his own prejudices while creating his art. Dr. Polidori speaks of a Jewish golem, who is a dangerous creature but it can be defeated if a certain phrase is repeated before it. The absence of the name of “John Keats” within Ackroyd’s narrative perhaps signify a similar logic. The text is then aware of its fictitious nature, the way the reanimated corpse of Jack Keat (if I may say) and the Jewish golem are aware of their false existence.

The author, Peter Ackroyd is thus constantly aware of the secondary and fictitious nature of his text. He realizes that employing the historical framework grants a unique legitimacy to his narrative, which he is too happy to question in the end. Linda Hutcheon’s sums up this nature of legitimacy in her observation –

“In both historiographic theory and postmodern fiction, there is an intense self-consciousness (both theoretical and textual) about the act of narrating in the present the events of the past, about the conjunction of present action and the past absent object of that agency” (pp.71).

While, constructing his work he initially follows what Barthes calls the death of the author and the birth of the reader model, however he gradually becomes an authoritative author determined to exorcise the voices of other authors to the periphery. Linda Hutcheon therefore says in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, “This complexity of clashing discourses can be seen in many historiographic metafiction.” (pp.53).

3.0 The Author as Frankenstein – A New Creation

It is this authoritarian desire to create something and be in control of it, is rejected by thinkers like Barthes. A similar impulse is noted in the narrative when Victor Frankenstein interacts with Professor Saville -

“We learn in Genesis, sir, that God formed man out of the dust of the / round and then breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” / “What of it?” / “My question is, of what did that breath consist?” / “You have been too much in the company of Mr. Shelley . . . You are beginning to / doubt Holy Scripture.” / “I am simply curious.” / “Never be curious. It is the path to perdition.” (p.49).

Ackroyd at this point is attempting an anatomy of fiction, just like Frankenstein is desiring to understand the essence which constitutes life. The paper at this juncture shall strive to identify all those textual portions which append Frankenstein and Ackroyd together. The author as ascertained earlier, is an extension of the reader in this historiographic metafictional text. This identification is explored even further at a more thematic level, when the author sets foot on a quest similar to that of Frankenstein. Both of them are attempting to create life, or in this case ‘meaning’ from an existence that is no more. If seen in this light, the “graverobbers” or the “resurrectionists” (p.58), Miller, Boothroyd and Lane transform into extensions of the author. The way they dig up the graves to unearth corpses, is identical to how the author is digging up the literatures and history of the past. The author is again synonymous with Frankenstein and the text is his monster. This takes us back once again to Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion that there is essentially no disparity between the contents of a book and its composition and structure. The narrative of *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein* and Peter Ackroyd’s attempt to retell the *Frankenstein* narrative thus merge into a singular organic structure.

The way Frankenstein conducts numerous experiments before becoming successful, similarly, the text provides certain instances, where it appears that the author is attempting to conduct several experiments before succeeding in the act of creation. Frankenstein once stands in a pool of blood and states, “I wished to prove that the organs of the creature were not distinct entities, but depended for their efficacy upon the interdependence of them all. Thus if I hindered the workings of one, then the others would be harmed or damaged in some fashion.” (p.51). This approach of Frankenstein instantly reminds the cautious reader of the structuralist perception of meaning making, where everything is part of a larger system. Perhaps this expresses Ackroyd’s awareness that his narrative exists within the larger discourse of ‘Frankenstein’. Linda Hutcheon expresses a similar affirmation -

“Historiographic metafiction represents not just a world of fiction, however self-consciously presented as a constructed one, but also a world of public experience. The difference between this and the realist logic of reference is that here that public world is rendered specifically as discourse.” (pp.36).

Ackroyd perhaps acknowledges this fact that his work is not a text suspended in isolation. This view is also carried forward in the text when Daniel Westbrook writes a letter to Frankenstein, expressing Shelley's interest in William Godwin's "Necessitarianism" –

Mr. Godwin's treatise on Necessity, and yesterday evening he recited to us the philosopher's belief that in the life of every being there is a chain of events which began in the distant ages that preceded his birth and continued in regular procession through the whole period of his existence (p.102).

The idea of "necessity" therefore validates the notion of the 'Frankensteinean' discourse. It locates Ackroyd's narrative within the *Frankenstein* omnibus. The consequent introduction of Godwin and Mary Shelley, as characters is also an attempt in the author's part to include Mary Shelley within the discourse of 'Frankenstein'. The author thus manages to create a cyclical chain of events, where, as stated earlier he precedes Mary Shelley's narrative of *Frankenstein*.

Ackroyd's position is thus ambivalent, or cyclical towards the other voices echoing within his narrative. On one hand, he acknowledges their existence and on the other he constantly attempts to subvert them, so that his own voice predominates the text. A similar idea is expressed when the monster acknowledges his own existence and attempts to remember its past and goes to meet his sister, Annie Keat. However, it soon realizes the futility of such an act and it says –

Like some distant echo I recalled the name of Jack Keat; it might have been revealed to me in the low rolling of the thunder, or the instant of the lightning flash, so subdued and sudden that I scarcely grasped it. . . . I am no longer Jack Keat, but something deeper and darker than any individual doom. (p.169).

This realization is also true in case of the text. As already stated, the monster is a metaphor for the text. It is based on Shelley's *Frankenstein* but Ackroyd's retelling is something else altogether. It assimilates and manages to transcend the text. This forceful juxtaposition of the past and the present creates something new. Like the monster, the text perhaps gazes at the creator and reflects:

And then I saw you. I believe that I knew at once that you were my author, that you had transmitted life into my own frame. I did not experience any sensation of gratitude, however, but one of curiosity. What was this breath and motion with which I was endowed? At that moment the world could show me no greater marvel than my own existence: yet I did not know what it was to exist! I believe that you said something to me—some imprecation, some refusal—yet to me your strange voice seemed to issue from the darkness that I had lately escaped (p.158).

The ending is even more poignant when compared to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In Shelley's narrative, Victor refuses to take responsibility of his creation and he dies in that pursuit. The monster conveys its relation to Victor, as that of a mother attempting to abort her child. It says, "I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on." (*Frankenstein*, 170). Whereas, in Ackroyd's narrative, in the end, Victor does not hesitate to accept the responsibility of his creation. They reach a conclusion and decide that it is best to destroy the creation, however, as he fails to kill the monster, Victor realizes that he is inseparable from his creation and he accepts his creation. Ackroyd's *Frankenstein* is therefore more responsible and more violent at the same time, for the creature exists in his imagination. The concluding phrase of the book reads – "Then we wandered out, the creature and I, into the world where we were taken up by the watchmen" (p.279). The trinity of the monster, creator and the watchmen symbolize the triumvirate of the text, author and the reader. The text and the author

become one, but in case of Ackroyd's narrative, the author is also the reader, as established earlier. Thus it is perhaps safe to say that Ackroyd through his new creation questions the binary positions of the author and the reader.

4.0 Conclusion

The above study, therefore, presents how Ackroyd's narrative conforms to the genre of historiographic metafiction. Being an embodiment of this genre, it fulfils the necessary criteria of problematizing the very boundaries of history, fiction and authenticity. It provides an alternate reading to the *Frankenstein* discourse, and in doing so, attempts in the promethean manner to depose Mary Shelley's original narrative. The novel becomes an extension of the 'rhizome' like discourse model proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. This is of course made possible by the lack of control of the author over a text, after it is published. Ackroyd consumes the text as a reader and adds to the discourse as an author. Ackroyd therefore, blurs the distinction between the authorial and reader functions while attempting this task.

References

- Ackroyd, P. (2008). *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein: A Novel*. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, Random House.
- Barthes, R. (2001). *From The Death of the Author*. In V. B. Leitch (Ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (pp. 1466-1475). USA: W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1967)
- Cochran, P. (Ed.). (2010). *Byron and Women [Men]* (pp.150). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Davis, J. (Producer), & McGuigan, P. (Director). (2015). *Victor Frankenstein* [Motion Picture]. United States: 20th Century Fox.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2001). *From A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia: From Introduction: Rhizome*. In V. B. Leitch (Ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (pp. 1601-1609). USA: W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1980)
- Harris, J. C. (1994). *Batman: Castle of the Bat*. New York: DC Comics.
- Hutcheon, L. (1989). *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.
- Hutcheon, Linda (1985) *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, London and New York: Methuen.
- Laemmle, C. J. (Producer), & Whale, J. (Director). (1931). *Frankenstein* [Motion Picture]. United States: Universal Pictures.
- Motion, A. (2008, September 13). Frankenstein's frigging monster. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/sep/13/peterackroyd.fiction>
- Picart, C. J. (2003). *Remaking the Frankenstein Myth on Film: Between Laughter and Horror*. USA: SUNY.
- Shelley, M. W. (1994). *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. Retrieved from <http://gen.lib.rus.ec/book/index.php?md5=69D2E28FAE552BF938F173A648C4B448>
- Stevenson, R. L. (1994). *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. UK: Penguin Books.

Anish Bhattacharyya is presently working as an Assistant Professor in English in the Department of Language and Literature, Adamas University. He is also pursuing his Ph.D in the Department of English and Other Modern European Languages, Visva Bharati University, Shantiniketan. His research interests include Young Adult Dystopian Literature in American and Japanese fictions. (Orcid id: 0000-0001-8104-2752). Email: anishbhattacharyya@gmail.com
