The Tragedy of "First Impression": Analyzing the Fate of the "Monster" in Frankenstein from the Perspective of the Primacy Effect

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Abstract: This paper employs the primacy effect theory to analyze the generative mechanism of the "monster's" tragic fate in Frankenstein, integrating the cognitive dissonance theory and stigma theory to explore how appearance-based prejudice triggers group exclusion and individual psychological distortion through "cognitive violence." Under the primacy effect, the "monster" elicits negative first impressions from humans due to its grotesque appearance, encountering systematic exclusion such as abandonment by its creator Victor, attacks from villagers, and expulsion by the De Lacey family (Shelley, 2014). Its kind deeds are misinterpreted due to cognitive dissonance and fail to reverse the prejudice (Yan & Li, 2015). Based on stigma theory, the "monster's" appearance is defined as a "discrediting characteristic," which, after being negated by Victor's diary and reinforced by social labeling, ultimately leads to stigma internalization. The "monster" shifts from "yearning for integration" to revenge and finally self-immolates at the end of its vendetta (Goffman, 1963/1986; Guo, 2015). Through the logical chain of "primacy effect triggering prejudice → cognitive dissonance reinforcing exclusion → stigmatization fostering cognitive violence," this paper deepens the understanding of the novel's themes of "social exclusion" and "cognitive violence," providing insights for reflecting on the harms of "labeled cognition" in reality and constructing an inclusive cognitive system.

Keywords: Frankenstein; Primacy Effect; Cognitive Dissonance; Stigma Theory

1.Introduction

In social cognition, the initial impression an individual forms of others often dominates subsequent evaluations and behavioral attitudes. This phenomenon, proposed by the American psychologist Lochins in 1957, is known as the "primacy effect," also referred to as the first impression effect. It is a subjective tendency in social perception, referring to the influence of the first information received on the subsequent cognition of an object during the social cognitive process (Shi, 1988). Liu Guangling (2008) points out that its essence is a priority effect, where people tend to value initial information and use it to interpret subsequent information; research by Guo and Xiao (2022) also confirms the impact of the order of information reception on impressions and judgments, as Lochins' experiments revealed that the first information obtained plays a decisive role in shaping the overall impression.

Zou and Chen (2013) categorize the psychological explanations of the primacy effect into two types: first, the initial impression forms a memory schema, and subsequent information is assimilated into it; second, initial information receives more attention and elaborate processing, while subsequent information is easily overlooked. The tragic fate of the "monster" with an unusual appearance in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein contains profound psychological and sociological implications.

The core theoretical logical relationship of this paper is as follows: the primacy effect serves as the cognitive starting point (the monster's appearance triggers negative first impressions); cognitive dissonance acts as the intermediate mechanism (alleviating the conflict between impressions and behaviors by denying kind deeds); stigmatization is the final outcome (systematic exclusion caused by labeling); cognitive violence is the form of harm permeating the entire process. Subsequently, combining Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory proposed in 1957 and Goffman's stigma theory proposed in 1963 (Yao, Huang, & Pan, 2014), this paper will analyze the generative mechanism of the "monster's" tragedy along the logical chain of "appearance-based prejudice triggering → cognitive dissonance reinforcing prejudice → stigmatization leading to social exclusion."

2.The Monster's Experiences and an Analysis of Its Fate from the Perspective of the Primacy Effect

2.1 The Monster's Social Experiences: Facts and Manifestations of Exclusion

2.1.1 The Creation and Appearance of the Monster

The "monster" is assembled by the scientist Victor Frankenstein from various corpses to explore the mysteries of life. Victor describes its appearance: "His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips" (Shelley, 2014/Liu, Trans., p.48). Upon witnessing the monster's awakening, Victor immediately flees the laboratory.

When the "monster" sees its own reflection in a pond, it is "horror-struck" and recognizes itself as a "hideous devil," lamenting, "All I possess is this deformed, ugly, and abhorrent body—I am not even human" (Shelley, 2014/Liu, Trans., p.117). The huge difference between its appearance and that of humans becomes the primary label for others' cognition.

2.1.2 The Monster's Behavioral Performance

The monster's behavior evolves through three stages:

The initial stage of actively reaching out to humans: After witnessing the poverty of the De Lacey family, it abandons stealing food and survives on wild fruits, secretly collecting firewood for them at night; it rescues a drowning girl at the risk of its own life but is shot by the girl's companion (Shelley, 2014/Liu, Trans., p.140).

The middle stage of retaliating against humans: After witnessing Felix's negative evaluations and flight, it sets fire to the cottage; when attempting to make friends with Victor's younger brother William and being insulted, it strangles William and frames the servant Justine; after Victor tears up the promise to "create a female companion" (Shelley, 2014/Liu, Trans., p.168-170), it kills Victor's close friend Clerval and frames Victor, and murders Elizabeth during Victor and Elizabeth's honeymoon.

The final stage of self-destruction: After Victor dies of illness during his revenge journey, the "monster," after bidding farewell to the captain, chooses to self-immolate on a funeral pyre in the Arctic ice fields.

2.1.3 Systematic Social Exclusion of the Monster

Social groups form a systematic chain of exclusion against the "monster": Its creator Victor abandons it due to its ugly appearance revealed at birth (Shelley, 2014/Liu, Trans., p.48-49) and insults it with words like "abhorred monster" and "devil" in subsequent conversations; the shepherd in the hut screams and flees upon seeing it; the villagers in the village either scream, faint, run away, or attack it, leaving it covered in wounds; among the De Lacey family, Agatha faints, and Felix "tore me from his father, and struck me violently with a stick" (Shelley, 2014/Liu, Trans., p.134), leading the entire family to flee the next day. The companion of the rescued girl shoots and wounds it, and William insults it with abusive words like "monster" and "ugly wretch" (Shelley, 2014/Liu, Trans., p.142). These consistent reactions are essentially a collective manifestation of the cognitive prejudice of "appearance equals essence" under the primacy effect.

2.2 An Analysis of the Exclusion Mechanism from the Perspective of the Primacy Effect

2.2.1 Appearance-Based Prejudice: The Triggering and Solidification of the Primacy Effect

The monster's grotesque appearance is the root cause of the negative first impression. Characters in the novel judge it as a terrifying and dangerous being based solely on its appearance, adopting hostile, exclusive, and aggressive attitudes while ignoring its inner nature. Victor's immediate flight from the laboratory upon seeing the monster after its creation is a typical manifestation of the primacy effect; the villagers' commotion and attacks when the monster appears in the village further deepen the negative impression.

After seeing its own reflection in the pond, the "monster" also recognizes itself as a "devil" (Shelley, 2014/Liu, Trans., p.110), filled with shame and despair. Long-term exclusion and discrimination, coupled with negative cognition of its own appearance, gradually lead the "monster" to develop self-doubt and self-negation, believing that it is suffering, unfortunate, and pitiful. This psychological state exacerbates its loneliness and pain, ultimately leading it to take revenge and move toward the tragic end of self-immolation.

2.2.2 Behavioral Contrast and Cognitive Dissonance: The Bias Mechanism of the Primacy Effect

The monster's kind deeds form a sharp contrast with the first impression people have of it, yet they are difficult to accept. It helps the De Lacey family but is violently driven away; this contrast deepens misunderstandings and prejudices, making the "monster" feel even more lonely and helpless.

From a psychological perspective, this reflects the limitations of the primacy effect: people value the first information obtained, and the quickly formed first impression affects the judgment and interpretation of subsequent information, ignoring the complexity and diversity of the object. This contrast also triggers cognitive dissonance. According to Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, when new cognition conflicts with old cognition, individuals will choose to deny the new cognition or find more new cognitive information to replace the old one to eliminate discomfort (Yan & Li, 2015). Faced with the conflict between the monster's kind deeds (new cognition) and its terrifying appearance (old cognition), the De Lacey family maintains the old cognition through methods such as "attributing it to divine intervention" and "violent expulsion" instead of correcting the negative impression.

Under the control of the primacy effect, they do not revise their negative impression of the "monster" but attribute its kind deeds to "divine intervention" or "accident" to maintain psychological balance. This "resolution" of cognitive dissonance temporarily alleviates individual psychological conflicts but further strengthens the negative impact of the primacy effect, hindering the "monster's" social integration. The monster's subsequent retaliatory behaviors are an extreme manifestation of abandoning the new cognition of "integrating into humans" and accepting the old cognition of "being a devil" after long-term unresolved cognitive conflicts.

2.2.3 Social Exclusion and Stigmatization: The Chain Reaction of the Primacy Effect

The negative attitudes and reactions of others have a profound impact on the "monster," making it lose trust and hope in humans. Loneliness and pain exacerbate its resentment and desire for revenge. William's insults dishearten it, leading it to strangle William and frame Justine; after Victor tears up the promise, its desire for revenge reaches its peak (Shelley, 2014/Liu, Trans., p.170). From a social psychological perspective, the attitudes and reactions of others shape the "monster's" behaviors and psychology, making it shift from actively seeking integration to retaliating against society.

This process can be explained through stigma theory. Goffman defines stigma as a "discrediting" characteristic that distinguishes an individual from others; such characteristics hinder the individual's ability to perform social roles and functions, leading to their degradation and loss of status as a "full human being" (Guo, 2015). The monster's physical deformity is a "discrediting characteristic." In interactions with social groups, it is not included in the human group but is classified into the negative impression group of "monster" and "devil," making its attempts to integrate into society repeatedly frustrated.

The monster's stigma internalization process conforms to the progressive logic of "others labeling → group reinforcing the label → self-accepting the label" proposed by Goffman (Yao, Huang, & Pan, 2014): Victor's abandonment and the initial labeling of "devil," coupled with the exclusion and attacks from groups such as villagers and the De Lacey family, reinforce the stigmatized cognition that "physical deformity equals evil"; after reading Victor's diary, the "monster" learns about its "ugly and abhorrent" birth process (Shelley, 2014/Liu, Trans., p.128), further strengthening self-negation; finally, the reflection in the pond makes it form the self-cognition of "I am a devil," completing stigma internalization. From a power perspective, stigmatization is caused by power differences; dominant social groups implement social exclusion against "social outliers" through labeling, stereotypes, and other

means (Link & Phelan, 2001; cited in Guo, 2015). As a "marginal existence" lacking social power, the "monster" cannot resist the stigma label and discrimination, gradually believing that it is unworthy of acceptance, and ultimately abandons kindness, retaliating against society with the behavioral logic of a "devil." Stigma internalization leads to the individual's "social death," and the monster's self-destruction is an inevitable result of the combined effect of stigmatization and social exclusion (Kleinman, 1988; cited in Guo, 2015).

3.Conclusion

Taking the primacy effect theory as the core, combined with cognitive dissonance and stigma theory, this paper sorts out the tragic process of the "monster" in Frankenstein: triggering negative first impressions due to its grotesque appearance, encountering systematic exclusion, shifting from kindness to revenge, and finally self-immolating. It clarifies the key role of the primacy effect in "prejudice triggering → cognitive solidification → stigma internalization," deepening the understanding of the novel's themes of "cognitive violence" and social exclusion.

This analysis has practical implications for contemporary society: At the level of technological ethics, with the rapid development of technologies such as gene editing and artificial intelligence, more "unconventional" technological products or life forms may emerge. In the novel, Victor creates life "with a guilty conscience" (Shelley, 2014/Liu, Trans., p.42) but shirks responsibility due to its ugly appearance. This behavior of "ignoring technological ethics," together with humans' denial of the monster's essence based on its appearance, forms a double warning. It reminds us that when facing new things, we cannot deny their value based solely on their "unconventional" appearance; instead, we should establish a concept of technological ethics that emphasizes both technological breakthroughs and ethical responsibilities, avoiding the double prejudices of "judging quality by appearance" and "lack of responsibility."

At the level of reflecting on human cognitive models, in the era of social media, fragmented information makes it easier for people to label individuals or things based on first impressions, just as people in the novel regard the "monster" as a "devil" solely based on its appearance, ignoring its kind deeds of secretly delivering firewood and bravely rescuing the drowning girl. This reminds us to actively break free from the cognitive inertia of "preconceived notions," understand the essence of things through long-term observation and multiple perspectives, reduce misunderstandings and exclusions caused by the primacy effect, and lay the foundation for building an inclusive and diverse social cognitive environment.

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