

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED BOOK COVERS OF MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*

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Abstract:

Frankenstein is a thrilling science fiction novel by Mary Shelly. Even after a century, the story elicits a great response among the readers. Since then the novel has been widely published by different publishing houses with various versions ranging from the complete unabridged work to graphic and comics. The work of an author gets its immediate attention through the external cover. The book's popularity is decided by the outer carton which evokes an interest in readers. This visual impact plays a vital role in the selling of a work. Semiotics is a part of linguistics that helps in estimating the value of a work. Hence, a semiotic analysis of such book covers would help the audience on what to expect from the book. The present paper is an attempt to apply semiotics to analyse the selected book covers of Frankenstein by Mary Shelly. Through this analysis it becomes clear that the language combined with visual presentation plays a vital role in evoking interest among the readers.

Key Words: *Semiotics, frankenstein, visual, verbal, pictorial, iconography, colours.*

Introduction:

Mary Shelly's Frankenstein has been acclaimed widely for the novel approach of the writer, which made the novel popular among the readers of the past till the present century. Hence, it becomes important to analyse the elements which made the novel popular among the readers. In this regard, the book's cover plays a vital role in selling the book. The author explains about the novel thus:

The circumstance on which my story rests was suggested in casual conversation. It was commenced partly as a source of amusement, and partly as an expedient for exercising any untried resources of mind. Other motives were mingled with these as the work proceeded. I am by no means indifferent to the manner in which whatever moral tendencies exist in the sentiments or characters it contains shall affect the reader; yet my chief concern in this respect has been limited to avoiding the enervating effects of the novels of the present day and to the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue. (Preface, 62)

The above quote informs the readers of the purpose of the novel. The project aims to explore how visual objects communicate with people and their response to the visuals. Book covers, as the first look of the book, *en routes* the book's reach. By incorporating various techniques the authors and book publishers influence the way people look at the book. In the case of *Frankenstein*, the various editions have different covers to impress the viewers, an inevitable goal of the book covers. The article examines the techniques used to allure the audience under the light of semiotics. The research paper studies the effect of Iconography in the book cover by analysing elements like key images, Tagline, layout, attentiveness, obviousness, etc. Further, it adds a special note on the aspects that make the book cover effective in getting the attention of the readers with a special reference to colours. Out of the book covers of *Frankenstein* that

are available online, six are selected through Stratified random sampling method.

Background of the studies:

The word semiotics originated from the 19th century: from Greek *sēmeiotikos* 'of signs', from *sēmeioun* 'interpret as a sign', which refers to the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation ("Semiotics"). Andrew analyses the value of semiotics through the theory of Barthes and proclaims that, in Saussurean analysis, which is widely applied by Barthes, the distinction between signifier and signified is crucial. The signifier is the image used to stand for something else, while the signified is what it stands for (a real thing or, in a stricter reading, a sense-impression) ("Ceasefire Magazine"). This plays a vital role in the interpretation of the selected posters. The signified sometimes has an existence outside language and social construction, but the signifier does not. Further, the relationship between the two is ultimately arbitrary. There are many different ways a particular signified could be expressed in language or different objects divided-up. None of these ways is ultimately superior to the others. Gallagher (2015) demonstrates that the studies had proved that the impact of visuals is more as the readers find it appalling and "eye-catching" thus creates a great impact on inducing people to read the book. The cover of the book could possibly affect the sales of the book. Apple's 2016 holiday message, "Frankie's Holiday," is one good example, showing the monster tearfully getting the love and acceptance he always craved ("Teaching Frankenstein"). So it is worthwhile to analyse the various book covers of the novel. Kathleen (2010) in her thesis, analyses the visual effects of the cover page. In these theses colour is given more prominence than the objects presented. Tanuj Kumar (2018) has analysed a few classical *Frankenstein* book covers. He has not used any theoretical background. It has been found that the researcher has not applied any theory for the study. He has used intersexuality to bring out the impact of the book's cover even decades later. This could be found in the lines below where the researchers comments by referring to the classic book cover of *Frankenstein*: "By fluke or intention, the jagged, lightning-bolt typography would resurface some six decades later in another famous logo of a book-film franchise that would win hearts the world over: Harry Potter" ("www.livemint.com").

Methodology:

The posters are analysed based on Iconography, Visual as well as verbal.

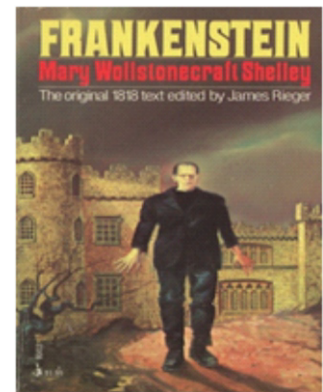
Sampling Technique:

The Stratified sampling procedure is followed. The collected posters are grouped based on the similarities of the components and then from the stratified samples, about 10 posters were selected. Out of the 150 posters of the outer cover of the novel *Frankenstein*, 06 were selected using a stratified sampling method. A qualitative analysis was made on the selected posters using the semiotic theories.

Analysis of the Selected Posters:

Poster 1:

Visual effect: The use of colours, focus on authors name, the image used. In the poster given below, the title is written in bold yellow with a contrasting brown background. The authors name in red colour is highlighted in order to promote the work. The castle at the background looks old and worn out suggesting it has a historical context. The figure of a terrible monster in the foreground suggests that there is something sinister.



(Source: Mara McAfee; Pocket Books, 1976)

Evaluation of Title Design:

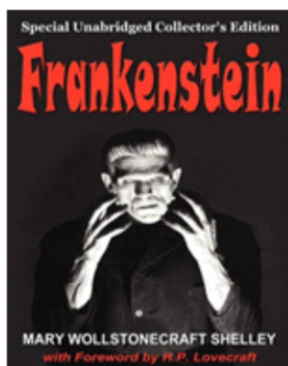
Title design is based on the influence of socio-cultural context, technology and its usages. Researchers have selected 10 book covers of the various editions and analysed them under the light of Syntactic that constitutes layout, letter form; prominent trends in letter forms and decorative elements used in posters and Semantics that constitutes Title design based on the meaning of the title, the story, Title designs with external semantic elements, letter forms that reflects the theme of the film, letter forms with respect to genre of the movie and Pragmatics that constitutes poster making techniques and display positions. For future study the researcher has suggested to study the other elements in the movie posters using the posters belong to any other decades.

Contribution of colours:

Another technical aspect is the contribution of the colours is analysed by few researchers. Colours being one of the most important and effective tool to convey messages Cecilia Fagerholm has analysed the significance of colours in various genres of movie posters. Science Fiction, Romantic comedy, Action and 3D Animation are the four fictions choose by the researcher. He has given a note on what colours really say and the effect they create in the posters to represent them as a specific kind of poster (genre).

Poster 2:

Evaluation of Title Design: Here the title is written in red and bold, the color suggest it belongs to a horror genre. In this poster, the title is printed in red colour and the shape of the letters suggest that readers could expect some horror in the story.



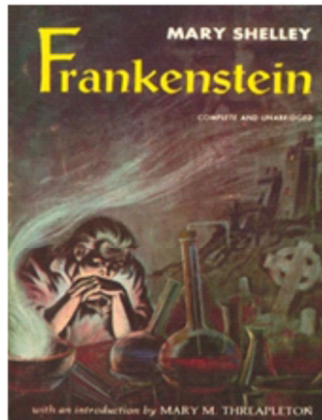
(Source: [google.com/search?q=Frankenstein+special+unabridged+edition](https://www.google.com/search?q=Frankenstein+special+unabridged+edition))

Visual Effect:

The background of the poster is black which suggests the presence of dark and evil scenario found in the whole story. The image is projected in black and white with horror face and lean and sharp blood stained fingers create the notion of an inhuman psycho who would jeopardize the peace and happiness of common people in the novel. His eyes are closed, but when we look at them instantly, they appear to be open and pierce through us creating chillness in our spine. The horror image is the cynosure of the novel which focuses on the action that revolves around a Psychic character. The image creates fear and terror as well as inquisitiveness in the minds of the readers to find who is he and what he does.

Contribution of Colours:

The name of the author is printed in white, symmetrically printed in clear bold Capital fonts which hide the importance of the author. Whereas the name of the person who has forwarded the novel with his note is printed in red and in italics. Though the font is smaller than the author's name, the red colour signifies the priority given to the person who had written the forward note. It is understood that the forward note stimulates the mood of the readers to read the novel.

Poster 3:

(Source: Airmont Books Classic Series, 1963)

Title Design:

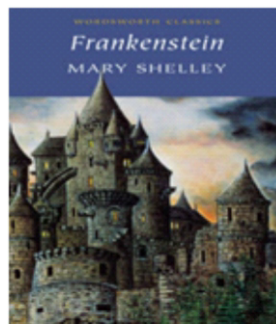
In the above poster colour of the title is in yellow against a dark background. The initial letter is Larger than the rest of the letters. The tall Letter 'F' probably indicates the fear and horror the readers could expect in the story. The name of the novelist is printed in white colour with a symmetrical font. Another notable feature is, her middle name is omitted which suggests that the creation is important than the creator.

Visual Effect

The image projects the height of intellectual curiosity, i.e. the person, probably a scientist is in deep thinking, to create something that would make the world to look at him in awe. May be he is very much appalled because his creation had turned to be infernal and disastrous. The slanted cross and tombstone indicate death. The glass instruments used for scientific research show some ongoing diabolic research. The desolate and dilapidated house and the tree without leaves, highlight the horror in the novel. Despite the desolation, we could see the glow of light at the window at the top storey of the building. Probably it may be a haunted house, which builds up the horror that is already there in the minds of the readers. The fire and fumes indicate the beginning and the end of human life respectively.

Colour pattern and visual Effect:

The name of the novelist is printed white colour. Whereas, the title of the novel is printed in bright yellow, much bigger than the name of the novelist, signifies the importance of the novel than the name of the author.

Poster 4:

(Source: devouringtexts.blogspot.com)

Title Design:

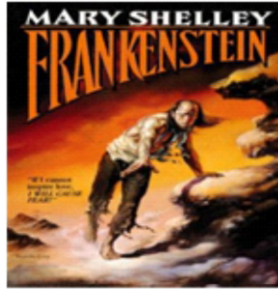
In the above poster, the title and the name of the author are in white on a blue background. The ancient castle occupies two third of the cover page diminishing the importance of the title and the author.

Visual Image and Colour:

The stony castle with a glowing light at its windows provides a horrifying image to the readers

urging them to know who live there and how they manage to live in such a huge and palacious castle without fear. It also creates a curiosity in the minds of the readers to enter the castle to explore the enigmatic environment. The huge dark walls of the towers of the castle against the grey, black and orange colour horizon provides a horrifying effect to the readers. The dark crannies of the windows and the wide entrance of the castle appear as if a monster with multiple eyes and wide jaws growling to swallow its prey. Ultimately the image gives us a nightmarish experience.

Poster 5:



(Source: Tor Classics, 1994)

Title Design:

In the above poster the title of the novel is quite catchy. The first letter F is bigger than the rest of the letters and each letter is smaller than the previous one. This arrangement of letters expresses the notion that the story begins with a big bang that creates fear and horror in the mind of the reader and as the story moves forward the tension gets diminished.

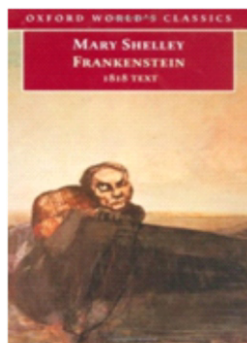
Visual effect

The image on the poster shows a man in tattered clothes. From the attire, we could understand that he is a tramp and vagabond, neglected and marginalized by the society living in the fringes of the society. His muscular body proves that he is physically strong and powerful. His facial expression and body language give us a cue that he is at war with humanity which had neglected him. Probably he wanted to take revenge on the society that had neglected him. The sentence printed in apostrophe is a proof to substantiate the mood of the person. The second part of the statement is printed in capital letters invokes fear in the minds of the reader. The contour of the rock on which the man leans gives a ferocious outlook. Even the mountain peaks are dwarfed in the presence of the horrendous monster.

Contribution of colours

The red and orange background of the poster gives the reader a ghastly environment that is stored for him in the novel.

Poster 6



(Source: Frankenstein: or 'The Modern Prometheus': The 1818 Text (Oxford World's Classics) Paperback 1998)

Title Design:

The image in the above poster evokes trepidation in the mind of the reader. The title of the novel and the name of the author are printed in the same font with the same size. Thus both are given equal importance.

Visual Impact:

The light orange glow at the horizon shows the twilight i.e. the end of the day. The monster with big wide hungry eyes hiding behind a mountain is about to prowl stealthily into the darkness to hunt for its prey. The monster is squatted, so only one-third of its body is shown bright and two-third of his body is hidden. Its huge stature that subjugates the mountain shows its power over nature.

Colour Contribution:

The bright colour of the upper part of the poster contrast with dark colour of the lower part indicates the power of the evil that is about to unleash its satanic power over good. On a whole, the image predicts the hidden demonic nature of mankind that may outbreak at any moment.

Result and Discussion:

All the above book covers had a great impact on the audience. The way of presenting the images is cleverly planned. The nuances in presenting the images are analyzed using the elements such as key-image, layout, attentiveness, obviousness, realism, title's font and colour and purpose of the poster. Key-images are the heart of a poster. They also serve for the attentiveness. It decides what the viewers want to see and what they have to infer from it. Thus key-image serves as the mastermind of the poster. The layout is the outer sketch of the poster where the images will be placed accordingly. Clever planning of layout helps the poster to exhibit what it exactly wants to show. Posters have to impress the viewers in a jiffy. Within the short span of time, posters have to transfer the maximum information.

After analysing the above posters we could see horror and destructive as a common phenomena. Thus, the book covers evoke curiosity in the minds of the reader to venture into the novel despite knowing the nightmarish experience they would encounter in every page. The colours used both in letters as well as in the background create an enigmatic dread in the minds of the readers. This may be the success formulae of the novel that has been read and reread for two centuries. Despite the modern technology where all classic books have been digitalized, the horror novel 'Frankenstein' by Mary Shelly is still read and appreciated by the modern millennium readers. The unique feature of the book covers serves for its success. The story speaks for the books but as far as motivation to read the books is concerned, it is the visuals that speak. The way the story is presented allures the audience more than the storyline. Only the images and the texts used in the cover page could give a clue to the readers beyond the title. Thus, these points prove to be evidence for the importance of images and their planning for the creation of successful book cover.

Conclusion:

The purpose of the book covers are achieved, as they have informed the nature of the story to the readers and have influenced them to read it. The mystery and horror in the images of the book cover allure the audience. By projecting the main characters, the core setting of the story and positioning them appropriately, the book cover informs the readers about the crux of the story. The shared elements of the book cover fill the mind of the readers with curiosity and desire. The impact they create influences the viewers to read the book. As all these desirable aims were obtained by the use of images in the selected book covers, the researcher concludes that iconography plays a vital role in creating a poster. It is found that there are no deviating factors in the poster i.e. no misleading images are presented in the poster. One of the main reasons for this achievement is that the book could attract the reader only if is framed with eye-catching images, utilised cleverly. Hence, the researchers conclude that the selected book covers demand special attention in the process of creation.

Scope for Further Research:

The paper has discussed various aspects of *Frankenstein* book cover on the basis of colour, layout, key image, Tile design, pattern, etc. Future research could be carried out using any other aspect that would appeal to the readers in the book covers or could compare them with the revised book covers of *Frankenstein*.

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