

Frankenstein – A gothic tale of creature versus creator

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1 Introduction

Written by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelly as a response to a ghost story contest proposed by Lord Byron at Villa Diodati in the summer of 1816, *Frankenstein* (1818) is a work of literature unique in several aspects. This essay aims to explore a few of them in two parts.

The first part briefly situates the novel in the origins of the gothic genre (late 18th century and early 19th century) by enumerating some of its characteristic motifs. It is supposed to provide an external perspective of the novel as an introduction to the subsequent part.

The second part takes the form of a brief literary analysis focused on exploring features of the novel that relate to the following question: ‘What did Shelley intend when making the monster eloquent instead of making it mute or inarticulate as often depicted in the several adaptations of the novel?’

A final section is dedicated to a conclusion that accommodates the perspectives approached in both parts.

2 The gothic perspective

It is almost impossible to deny the correlation between the course of Mary Shelley’s personal life and her masterpiece *Frankenstein*. Daughter of prominent writers of the Regency period in Britain, Mary faced the loss of her mother shortly after her birth, endured a difficult relationship with her stepmother, ventured across Europe at age 16 with a young poet and gave birth to a baby girl who only lived for a few days before arriving at Lake Geneva, Switzerland, in May 1816, for a gathering of writers led by Lord Byron. A year before, the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia plunged Europe into three years of darkness and famine and made 1816 the year without a summer, setting the ghastly context where *Frankenstein* was born (*Frankenstein: Freak Events That Gave Birth to a Masterpiece*, 2016; Laurence, 2018; *Mary Shelley*, n.d.; *Mary Shelley, Frankenstein and the Villa Diodati*, n.d.).

Gothic fiction began with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto - A Gothic Story* (1764), which brought the supernatural element (or the promise of the supernatural) that can take the form of mysterious elements of antiquity or strange or frightening old buildings. Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) brought up another element by exposing the vulnerable virgin Emily to an unspeakable fate in the hands of the powerful villain Montoni (*The Origins of the Gothic*, n.d.).

According to professor John Mullan (*The Origins of the Gothic*, n.d.), *Frankenstein* belongs to a

second wave of gothic novels that established new conventions: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* gave a scientific form to the supernatural formula. The following passage shows the moment Victor obtained the god-like power to create life via scientific knowledge acquisition:

After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter. (Shelley, 2017, p. 45)

The gothic, as a literary genre, is characterised by several features or motifs as professor John Bowen (Bowen, 2014) explains:

- **Strange places:** somewhere other, different, mysterious;
- **Clashing time periods:** many times in the form of uncanny events - everything that characters and readers think that they have safely left behind comes back with a vengeance;
- **Power and constraint:** violent differences in power - fragile women subjected to cursed, obscene or satanic men;
- **Terror versus horror:** professor Bowen mentions that Ann Radcliffe made an important distinction between terror and horror. Terror is concerned with the psychological experience of being full of fear and dread - the horrific things are not explicitly shown. By contrast, horror focuses on the horrific object or event itself;
- **A world of doubt:** gothic seeks to create in our minds the possibility that there may be things beyond human power, reason and knowledge.

In *Frankenstein*, there are the dangerous glaciers with their ice caves and deadly crevices. Also, Robert Walton and his crew's lives are threatened when their ship gets mysteriously trapped in ice:

Last Monday (July 31st), we were nearly surrounded by ice, which closed in the ship on all sides, scarcely leaving her the searoom in which she floated. (Shelley, 2017, p. 15)

In the following passage, the innocent Justine Moritz revealed how she was pressed by the confessor into admitting a crime she had never committed:

Ever since I was condemned, my confessor has besieged me; he threatened and menaced, until I almost began to think that I was the monster that he said I was. He threatened excommunication and hell fire in my last moments, if I continued obdurate. Dear lady, I had none to support me; all looked on me as a wretch doomed to ignominy and perdition. What could I do? (Shelley, 2017, p. 86)

Victor's creature itself is depicted as a being of superhuman features, for example, in this passage:

A flash of lightning illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy dæmon, to whom I had given life. (Shelley, 2017, p. 74)

Unlike some of its adaptations, the novel does not focus on horror elements, for instance, the assembly of body parts is not explicitly shown and the birth of the monster is not dramatically depicted. Instead,

it is arguable that *Frankenstein* explores terror in the form of a sequence of unfortunate events that undermines Victor's forces and leads him eventually to his death.

3 Creature versus creator

Victor's audacity in playing the role of a god comes with a high price as his creature regards him as its only hope to be accepted among humans. Mary Shelley conceived the monster not only with superhuman physical strength but also with impressive intelligence and cognitive capacities to the point of becoming capable of defying its own creator.

Impressively, the creature was able to quickly acquire language and became able to reason with people eloquently and convincingly. We believe that Shelley's approach to terror was to confront the naive imperfect creator Victor with a highly capable Adam in order to make apparent the mistake that is trying to subvert nature by over-relying on knowledge. Shelley makes Victor eventually admit:

Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.
(Shelley, 2017, p. 46)

Born good natured, the creature does whatever within its power to gain acceptance from humans but then realises that "a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster" (Shelley, 2017, p. 139) and rebels against its creator:

No: from that moment I declared everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against him who had formed me, and sent me forth to this insupportable misery. (Shelley, 2017, p. 143)

Then it discovers its power to subdue its now enemy:

'I, too, can create desolation; my enemy is not impregnable; this death will carry despair to him, and a thousand other miseries shall torment and destroy him.' (Shelley, 2017, p. 150)

Later and throughout the novel, it shows a strong character by declaring that evil had never been in its true nature:

Remember that I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Every where I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous. (Shelley, 2017, p. 100)

And finally it demonstrates good judgement by proposing Victor a mutually beneficial solution:

I am alone, and miserable; man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. My companion must be of the same species, and have the same defects. This being you must create. (Shelley, 2017, p. 150)

The creature turns the tables on its creator and this movement generates the terror that permeates the novel, a terror that plagues the lives of both creator and creature at their psychological level, a terror ingeniously architected by Shelley. Had the monster be mute or inarticulate, it would not be in position to intimidate Victor, who was a scholar. The intelligence and eloquence of the monster are also powerful instruments to engage the reader, who often derive enjoyment by becoming gradually sympathetic towards the monster.

We believe that adaptations that conferred a zombie-like aspect to the monster attempted to justify people's abhorrence against it by over-emphasising its dreadful aspect via the introduction of elements of horror such as explicitly showing its grafted body parts and giving it an inarticulate speech. As we can perceive, Shelley deliberately refused to follow this approach.

4 Final considerations

Ann Radcliffe's definition of terror recognises human limits in the sense that it puts the human experience of fear into perspective. By adopting this human perspective, Mary Shelley succeeds in exploring the tension that arises when the human scientist becomes a god and his human-like creature undermines its authority to expose the incompleteness of the scientist's achievement.

Unlike *Frankenstein*'s horror-based adaptations, Shelley was careful enough not to let over-emphasised horrific elements eclipse the connection and tension between god-like creator and human-like creature.

References

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