

How forbidden topics are transferred as gothic in frankenstein

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



The distinctive features of the Gothic may be defined as a series of strategies, partly evasive, partly revelatory for dealing with tabooed material. Discuss with reference to Frankenstein.

Frankenstein, although not placed within the ' gothic' setting of a large brooding castle in a Catholic town, is nonetheless immediately identifiable as gothic due to the macabre and uncanny set of circumstances it describes. It is also, " melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states" which is part of M. H. Abrams' definition of what is ' Gothic'. Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick describes certain key characteristics that relate to the idea of the ' gothic novel': an " involuted" style of writing; " possibilities of incest"; " poisonous effects of guilt"; the " unspeakable"; " doubles", heroines of " trembling sensitivity" and " impetuous" heroes. These subjects inspired fear in the reader and subsequently a revulsion for the subject described.

Because of this dramatic creation of horror and tension, which perhaps served to detract from more minor elements of the plot, taboo subjects could be more easily explored, new theories expounded and old ones ridiculed.

This technique is especially clear in Mary Shelley's seminal work:

Frankenstein. It is a novel which has been particularly subject to biographical readings due to several key elements within the plot, and the subtext of the novel. Incidents in Shelley's life such as her mother's death in childbirth; her own loss of three children; her elopement and subsequent rejection by her father are clearly linked to the plot of the novel, not to mention her and

Percy's interest in the natural sciences and Mary's highly literary background.

Shelley's skill as a writer is clear, and the 'involved' style of the novel is evidence of this. The sense of being 'involved', of being a complex structure is constant; the plot is wrapped in three layers of narrative. Firstly, Walton's epistolary opening; secondly, Frankenstein's own narrative; and thirdly, the reported speech of the monster. These complications in the narrative make it unclear as to who is the narrator from which we should take the moral hint. This serves to almost equally weight our feelings towards each character, at some points we may feel the utmost sympathy for the monster, such as when he is describing his attempts at acceptance and the violent rejection he receives:

...Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of bringing forth.

I was nourished with high thoughts of honour and devotion. But now vice has degraded me beneath the meanest animal. [p. 189 ch. VII]

At other points we cannot feel anything but hatred for a monster who has murdered innocent victims and who ceaselessly tortures Frankenstein. The above quotation at first inspires pathos for the monster's situation, but then reminds us of the crimes he has committed. Does this partial acceptance of the outsider promote a taboo opinion? It could be said that the monster is the epitome of the question of nature versus nurture as expostulated in 'The

war of ideas', he is a clear representation of a miscreant who is a social product, a creature spurned by society who then wreaks his revenge.

It is interesting to note that in 1800, the 'Anti Jacobin Review' cites the followers of Godwin and Wollstonecraft as being "the spawn of the monster", the monsters being revolutionaries, and the parents of Mary Shelley. There is an obvious link between the monster and the peasants of the French revolution, downtrodden by 'superiors' until breaking point, causing violence to ensue. Even the university which Frankenstein attends, Ingolstadt, was "notorious in the French revolution period as the home of the feared sect of conspirators and unorthodox religionists, the Illuminati" , Percy Shelly himself make allusion to such a sect in his poem, Alastor.

There is also a possible identification of Shelley with the monster, not only because of the epithet ascribed to her parents but because the monster is responsible for the death of his maker. Shelley's mother died in childbirth, making Mary a product of her death; Frankenstein metaphorically echoes this, the maker creates from the dead and is then killed himself. There is an intrinsic link between sex and death in the novel which perhaps emanates from Wollstonecraft's death. This link is evident in a dream described by Frankenstein,

...As I imprinted the first kiss on her [Elizabeth's] lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change...I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. [p. 39 ch. IV]

This disturbing dream links Frankenstein's action, the kiss, to the destruction of his loved ones, it prophesises the 'reality' which is to occur when the action that he thought was good and life giving turns to evil and destruction and he is now "unable to endure the aspect of the being... [he has] created" [ibid]. The image of the grave worm further emphasises this prophesy, the worms which he studied in the "charnel houses" are now in his dreams, now that they are associated with his mother and future wife he is able to realise the monstrosity of what he has done. Frankenstein's guilt becomes all pervading which he recognises in a poetic interlude,

We rest; a dream has power to poison sleep.

We rise; one wand'ring thought pollutes the day... [ibid]

Which perfectly exemplifies Kosovsky's idea of "the poisonous effects of guilt and shame". The child who is murdered in the novel carries the same name (William) as Mary's only surviving child in four, does this pertain to some overriding feeling of guilt which she entertained over the premature deaths of her other three children, or is there perhaps a sense of disbelief that he has survived? Perhaps even it is simply a nightmarish fantasy, as the novel was said to be conceived in a waking nightmare, "a number of writers have noticed the connection between Mary Shelley's 'waking dream' and her own experience of awakening sexuality, in particular the "horror story of maternity". Not only was the issue of pregnancy and birth taboo in general, but the fact that Mary conceived out of wedlock caused considerable sensation.

The idea synonymous with procreation, sex and death, is that of the fall from grace, the “horror” of maternity imposed on Eve as punishment for eating the apple from the tree of knowledge and Satan’s banishment to hell. The link is clear from the references made to *Paradise Lost* by the monster, who studies Milton’s masterpiece as part of his self-taught education, one such is his reference to “pandemonium after the lake of fire”, describing the lesser evil that he finds himself in. The monster bemoans his situation and again makes reference to the idea of a society created evil, when I recall the frightful catalogue of my deeds, I cannot believe my thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of beauty and the Majesty of goodness. But it is even so; the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil. Yet even the enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am quite alone [p. 189 ch. VII].

Here Frankenstein becomes analogous to God himself, which, in his hubris, he has tried to be. However, this is a representation of God as tyrannical, as casting out his creations and leaving them. This would be a very taboo subject to broach, but it is able to be broached as it is the monster who speaks and the opinion can be condemned as such if necessary. The monster seems to represent both Eve and Satan, Frankenstein himself, as a fatal over-reacher becomes an Eve-like figure, but also reflects God. This reflection and re-reflection of representations is refracted into doubling of character, another important Gothic technique. Frankenstein becomes both the tremblingly sensitive heroine: “I nearly sank to the ground through languor and extreme weakness”, [p. 40 ch. IV] and the impetuous hero, acting rashly

in creating the monster before thinking of the possible consequences.

Walton echoes the monster's plea for a friend: " I have longed for a friend... who would sympathise with and love me". Walton also mirrors Frankenstein's reckless ambition, his real voyage is mirrored by Frankenstein's metaphorical voyage of discovery and Frankenstein urges him to " seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition" [p. 186 ch. VII].

This idea of doubling makes the very taboo " possibilities of incest" still more distorted. Frankenstein's family has very strange connections, a father who married late in life to the young daughter of his close friend, a couple who then had Frankenstein but in the meantime adopted the daughter of Frankenstein's young Aunt. Frankenstein's mother was an orphan, as was Elizabeth, as is the monster to all intents and purposes; all are motherless. Elizabeth and Frankenstein are first cousins, raised as brother and sister, and even Elizabeth acknowledges that

...Affectionate playfellows...as brother and sister often entertain a lively affection towards each other, without desiring a more intimate union, may not such also be our case? [p. 158 ch. V]

Frankenstein however, vehemently denies the idea that he should marry any other women than Elizabeth. It is noted in *The Realist Novel* that in the 1818 text Elizabeth Lavenza and Frankenstein are first cousins; a marriage or sexual relationship between the two would have seemed to most readers improper. In the 1831 revision of the text this blood relation was removed.

This sense of incestuousness is heightened rather morbidly in the monster's threat, " I will be with you on your wedding night". The threat is repeated and I italicised which creates an even more ominous sense. There is a nasty implication of death and sex, even rape being invoked in this single threat. The suggestion of the monster, Frankenstein's ill begotten ' son' even being near the bridal chamber is disgusting to the imagination. Once again, the image created in the book is evident in the real life of Shelley, the sense of doubling is inherent in her sharing of her mother's name, and in therefore having no real identity for herself.

The idea of doubling is linked up to the idea of secrecy, of ambiguity, incest to " the unspeakable". Frankenstein realises the benefit of ignorance only in hindsight when he warns Walton, ...you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted; that cannot be:...how much happier that man who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than nature will allow. [p. 35 ch. III]

The tale becomes more frightening for not being clarified, and this is one of the major attributes of Gothic fiction, that things are frightening because they are unknown. It is the mystery, and the enigma, that creates the suspense and dramatic tension. In this sense it is this ' evasion' that creates the gothic feel to the novel and also allows controversial subjects to be discussed. However it is really the subtext of the novel, the skill of the writer at creating meaning in a text which allows the ' taboo' to be dealt with. More accurately, it is not exclusively the realm of the gothic novel to discuss the taboo, (although Gothic strategies are used to help purvey certain images

and ideas); whilst it is certainly true of the novel in its all encompassing form.