

# [Frankenstein persuasive](https://assignbuster.com/frankenstein-persuasive/)

The term Gothic conjures up images of frightened women, graveyards, and haunted castles in the mist, popular settings for horror films. But is this what Gothic means? The Oxford Companion to English Literature defines Gothic as, Tales of the macabre, fantastic, and supernatural, usually set amid haunted castles, graveyards, ruins and wild picturesque landscapes (Drabble 405). Furthermore, according to the Oxford Companion, Gothic tales reached the height of their considerable fashion in the 1790s and the early years of the 19th century (Drabble 406). It becomes obvious that Gothic is a literary term which describes a particular type of story and atmospheric surrounding. In so doing, it establishes a contrast between darkness and light, which evokes a sinister irony. In such tales, darkness often prevails, and according to literary scholars, elevated these horror stories into Gothic sublime (Bernstein 333). Specifically, the Gothic sublime symbolizes a black hole which finally absorbs history into its own emptiness (Bernstein 333). Gothic fiction is, quite simply, man taking a walk on the dark side.

There is, undeniably, no novel which epitomizes the popular Gothic structure more than Mary Wollstonecraft Shelleys early 19th-century masterpiece, Frankenstein (actually entitled, Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus). According to Greek mythology, Prometheus is a hero who steals fire from the heavens to serve man, but he is ultimately punished by the mighty Zeus, who chains him to a rock, where a vulture feasts on his liver. Inexplicably, however, the liver grows back each night. This reference abounds with Gothic possibilities, which Mary Shelley was, no doubt aware. She was long a fan of Gothic tales, and it was a night of story-telling in a Geneva castle which inspired her story. As she herself recalled in her introduction to Frankenstein, The season was cold and rainy, and in the evenings we crowded around a blazing wood fire, and occasionally amused ourselves with some German stories of ghosts, which happened to fall into our hands. These tales excited in us a playful desire of imitation. Two other friends (a tale from the pen of one of whom would be far more acceptable to the public than anything I can ever hope to produce) and myself agreed to write each a story founded on some supernatural occurrence (2).

While the familiar castle may have been missing from the story itself, a castle setting and the telling of ghost stories inspired the science fiction foray into the supernatural. There is also a proper setting for a Gothic tale, and if there is no castle, there is usually a thunderstorm to inspire terror. It was one particular thunderstorm which ignited the imagination of the protagonist, Victor Frankenstein: When I was about fifteen years old we had retired to our house near Belrive, when we witnessed a most violent and terrible thunderstorm. It advanced from behind the mountains of Jura; and the thunder burst at once with frightful loudness from various quarters of the heavens. I remained, while the storm lasted, watching its progress with curiosity and delight (Shelley 20).

Victor Frankenstein was a bright young man with a dark fascination which began as a child, with the raising of ghosts or devils… a promise liberally accorded by my favorite authors (Shelley 20). First manifesting itself as a deep interest in science while a college student, it grew into an obsession with the dead. While listening to his professor speak, increasingly tormented Victor lamented, I felt as if my soul were grappling with a palpable enemy; one by one the various keys were touched which formed the mechanism of my being: chord after chord was sounded, and soon my mind was filled with one thought, one conception, one purpose… I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation. I closed not my eyes that night. My internal being was in a state of insurrection and turmoil (Shelley 25). Many Gothic tales from the time involved people who were stranded in a haunted castle who were struggling to get out. In Frankenstein, the door between life and death was unlocked by technology, and once through the door, Victor Frankenstein knew there would be no turning back.

Not content with merely exploring the traditional Gothic form, Shelley decided to introduce a decidedly feminine quality to her Frankenstein story. By exploring and literally exploding the myth of motherhood, Mary Shelley created a new dimension to the genre, the Female Gothic (Frankenstein: Birthing the New Female Gothic ami. frank. html). Having recently given birth to a child who died shortly thereafter, Shelley employed the theme of birth, which had always been depicted as miraculous and beautiful, and put a terrifying spin on it as Dr. Frankenstein gives birth to his creation. According to one literary scholar, it was her nouveau female Gothic style which separated Frankenstein from similar horror tales of the time: Here, I think, is where Mary Shelleys book is most interesting, most powerful, and most feminine: in

the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences. Frankenstein seems to be distinctly a woman’s mythmaking on the subject of birth precisely because its emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth (Frankenstein: Birthing the New Female Gothic ami. frank. html). Of the most abnormal of births, Victor recalled, It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs (32). The nightmare of birth continued, with a repulsed Victor Frankenstein observed, How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe… 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 color as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips… I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart (32-33).

The creature Dr. Frankenstein bore during one rainy night in his laboratory became the most frightening of any Gothic monster. He wasnt merely a singular ghost, but was a composite of all the dead spirits who had once given his body parts life. However, setting and ghostly monsters are not the only characteristics of this Gothic work. There is usually a fair maiden in distress, who requires the care of a dashing knight/lover, who serves as her protector, warding off any evil spirits who may cross her path (Pitcher 35). This is also supplied in Frankenstein, in the character of Elizabeth Lavenza. Adopted by Victors parents, Elizabeth is the fairest and frailest of young ladies, having been seriously ill with scarlet fever as a child. She also provides the perfect Gothic contrast between darkness and light. Of his beautiful and adored companion, an enamored Victor would say, Everyone loved Elizabeth. The passionate and almost reverential

attachment with which all regarded her became, while I shared it, my pride and my delight… I… looked upon Elizabeth as mine- mine to protect, love, and cherish (Shelley 16-17).

What Victor would later come to realize, it was he who would place his beloved Elizabeth in mortal danger. But he was clearly under Elizabeths spell, and it was Elizabeth’s gentle encouragement which always resurrected him in much the same way as he had resurrected his monstrous masterpiece from the bodies of the dead. As Victor came to realize that his creation was a horrible mistake, for rejected by society as a whole, he embarked on a murderous rampage, even killing William, Victors younger brother. Wracked by guilt, Victor cried, Alas! I had turned loose into the world a depraved wretch, whose delight was in carnage and misery (Shelley 46).

While it was easy for Victor to cast the blame on his monstrosity, was it really the monster who bore responsibility for the murders, or the creator? When the monster confronts his creator, the ironic consequences of his actions are readily apparent: All men hate the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things! Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us. You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind (Shelley 61). This demonstrates not only irony, but a popular Gothic technique of visits from the dead. After all, though the harnessing of electricity breathed life into the creature, he was still an apparition, nevertheless. He was a new breed of Gothic ghost, one of the living dead, a scientific experiment gone terribly wrong.

The stage was now set for the inevitable climax between the monster and the maiden. Victor married Elizabeth, believing that only he can protect her from the creature. He vowed to tell his new bride of his murderous invention, in hopes that it would set them both free. However, this wasnt to be. The dark forces, which Victor has irrevocably set in motion, has obscured the light. After hearing her piercing scream, Victor ran into the bedroom to find the inert body of Elizabeth. According to Victor, She was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair. Everywhere I turn I see the same figure- her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier (Shelley 130). Unfortunately, the chivalrous knight was unable to save his damsel in distress.

Victor was not altogether surprised by this turn of events, because he had long been haunted by nightmares that Elizabeth would someday perish. In one such dream, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that 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 Shelley 32). Dream sequences play an integral part in the telling of Gothic tales, and scholars have later theorized that the awakening feelings of sexuality in the morally-conservative western Europe of the early nineteenth century were responsible for the subject matter of these dreams — usually a presumed-dead woman, who, it is hoped by her suitor, will be miraculously brought back to life with his kiss (Pitcher 35). As literary fiction critic E. W. Pitcher noted, One can argue for… Gothic fragments that the dream-death-stasis was also the expedient retreat of innocence from the awareness of sexual appetite, and the differentiating attraction to the other. Many Gothic fragments figured forth the struggles of sexual urgings (emergence into a mature self) with withdrawal into innocence (submergence in the old self) (35). Victors wedding night was supposed to represent the satisfaction of his sexual desire for the virginal Elizabeth. But, instead, Elizabeth is killed by Victors monster, which may have, perhaps, been an extension of his own perversions.

By now completely consumed by guilt, and realizing he must destroy his invention, Victor is only at peace at night while asleep. He mused, In sleep I saw my friends, my wife, and my beloved country; again I saw the benevolent countenance of my father, heard the silver tones of my Elizabeths voice (Shelley 136). Victor was eager to convince himself that his supernatural interactions were only dreams, but having crossed the precarious line between life and death, he couldnt be certain. In a final showdown with his creation, Victor Frankenstein can deny his link to the monster. Did the monster actually destroy the lives of Victors loved ones, or was Victor the culprit? Or was the real bearer of blame the rampant technology, which if left unchecked could destroy the society it was created to improve.

Mary Shelley does not provide any tidy endings in Frankenstein, which adds to its Gothic appeal. Readers are left to draw their own conclusions as to the meaning and the roots of the terror. Because the appeal of the Gothic novel was on the wane by the time Frankenstein appeared in 1818, it was the introduction of the science fiction element which rejuvenated the medium. As Professor Peter Pelzer wrote, It proved that Gothic could be revitalized by reshaping it to meet the changing interests in society. Shelley combined the intended shock, the feeling of horror with the new interest in science and humanity of her age. On the one hand purposely rooted in the Gothic tradition, she was showing on the other hand the ways out of the

limits of the genre for further development (Pelzer pelzer. htm). With Frankenstein, Mary Shelley brought Gothic literature into the 19th century, and expressed the fears of her contemporaries that the Industrial Revolution would forever change the values and conventions they held so dear. Though intentionally a period piece, it was the future implications of Frankenstein which made it a timeless classic. Dr. Pelzer noted, What lay at the base of this innovation is a change in the time relation. While Gothic was originally related to a certain era in the past, it is in the Frankenstein case directed to fantasies or speculations about the future which are able to create the same horror, to make the reader feel his nothingness (Pelzer pelzer. htm).

With Frankenstein, Mary Shelley not only mastered the Gothic form which had mesmerized her as a child, she improved upon it, leaving the indelible marks of her interest in the supernatural, her unlimited imagination, and her concerns for society. Gothic novels not only explore horror through their characters, but they also bring their readers in touch with their own fears. The Gothic castles of old which used to imprison visitors with their fears was now replaced by society itself, terrorizing its citizens with technology which has run amok. What could be more macabre, fantastic or Gothic than that?

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