

Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

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Lecture 12

Plotting the Gothic

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Week 3: Mary Shelley's
Frankenstein
Lecture 3B: Plotting the Gothic

LECTURE BY DR DIVYA A

Image source <https://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/isune/exhibits/shelley-frankenstein.html>

Hello, and welcome to this lecture on Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. In today's lecture, I am going to talk about the plot of this novel.

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Recap: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*—Gothic Tale



'Her account of her objective in thinking of a story appears to relate her novel to a class of fiction (Gothic) which has for its prime motive the generation of pleasure through the exploitation of fear, suspense and horror.'

Source: (Graham, 2018, p.18)



If you remember the previous lecture, we understand the purpose of Mary Shelley in producing this gothic tale. Her objective in this tale is to relate this particular novel *Frankenstein*, to a class a fiction called the gothic. So, this *Frankenstein* belongs to the genre of the gothic and that is a self consciousness on the part of Shelley, while structuring and writing this fiction and the prime motive, you should always remember, the prime motive is to exploit, exploit every human being's capacity for fear, the capacity to sense, suspense and horror.

So, this is a gothic tale and the purpose of the Gothic tale is to provoke fear, suspense and horror. So, using this formula, Mary Shelley produces an exciting and excellent work, which is very, very subtle and produces a range of effects, which cannot be neatly categorized into one type of literary piece. In fact, the success of the novel rest in the fact that this novel has multiple perspectives depending on the lens that we use to read this fiction.

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Science and Narrative



'Written in the form of letters, the story is told from several different points of view, which means that the reader learns to see events in complex ways, not always from the same angle as the narrator. It is probably the first ever science fiction novel, too'.

Source: (Richardson, 2014)



This novel Frankenstein was written in the form of letters. And since it is epistolary, it also offers the chance for the writer to bring in several different points of view, which means that the reader learns to see events in complex ways and not always from the same angle as the narrator. So, it is also probably, you should remember that the first ever science fiction work too. So, it is an epistolary work, it is in the form of letters and the purpose of using this kind of narrating technique is to allow multiple points of view and it has an advantage over third person lens because the third person we do get only the viewpoint of the narrator. So here we get the viewpoints of several characters from their own points of view. So these are some of the implications of using the epistolary method.

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The Plot

'Frankenstein opens in an epistolary style, with letters from Captain Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret. The narrative then switches to Victor Frankenstein'.

(Source: Stephanie Forward. https://www.open.edu/openlearn/sites/www.open.edu/openlearn/files/0n_introduction_to_mary_shelley_frankenstein.pdf)



And we need to understand that this story is primarily told in the form of letters written by Captain Robert Walton to his sister, Margaret. And along the way, the narrative switches to Victor Frankenstein, who himself begins the tale from his own point of view. So there are several eyes here, because of the nature of epistolary style.

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Nesting

'In Gothic novels this technique, termed 'nesting', is often used: stories are cradled within stories, as characters relate their tales'.

Source (Stephanie Forward)

Image source: <http://www.facebook.com/TamedHeretics/2560230508450/>



In Gothic novels, this kind of framed narrative or this kind of multiple points of view, where lots of people tell their tales, tell their stories through letters can also be termed as nesting. So stories are embedded within stories and in every story, a particular character relates their story. So this is

called nesting and it is a very important technique in gothic fiction and nesting creates both multiple points of view and at the same time there is a kind of a distancing effect. So the story seems to change. And there seems to be no one objective kind of reality as well in this kind of structure of nesting. So it is distanced and there is, the objective they keep shifting from one finger to the other.

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The Plot



En route to the North Pole, Walton rescues Victor from the ice. The latter recalls his happy youth in Geneva with his family and his friend, Henry Clerval. At the University of Ingolstadt Victor embarks upon scientific experiments to discover the secret of life, hoping to produce a living creature from body parts'.

Source: (Stephanie Forward)
Image source: <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/general-science/frankensteins-chemical-roots>



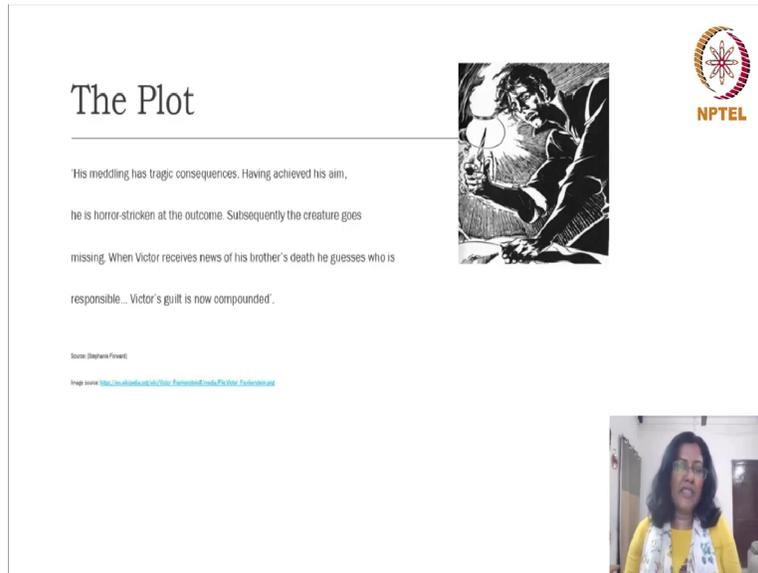
So what is the story? The story is told by Robert Walton primarily, and he is on route to the North Pole to find north western sea passage. And while he is travelling, Walton rescues Victor, Victor Frankenstein from the ice, and Victor recalls his happy youth. He tells Walton about his childhood, about his youth in Geneva, with his family, and his friend Henry Clerval.

So you get to know about Victor, through the eyes of Walton, in a letter that he writes to his sister, Margaret, so that is the premise. So, Victor also tells Walton about his student days at the University of Ingolstadt and where the student who is interested in science and experiment, he embarks on a range of innovative, unique, novel scientific experiments to discover that secret of life, the principle of life, and he hopes to produce a living creature from body parts. So, that kind of story is given to us through Walton, who hears the story from Victor Frankenstein.

So, if you kind of look at the story, you will be reminded of the previous discussions that we had, about how Mary Shelley came upon this idea of reproducing the spark of life. If you think about

the gothic context and the gothic story writing contest that was held amongst her friends. So we kind of understand that all those discussions went into the making of this particular kind of storyline.

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The Plot

This meddling has tragic consequences. Having achieved his aim, he is horror-stricken at the outcome. Subsequently the creature goes missing. When Victor receives news of his brother's death he guesses who is responsible... Victor's guilt is now compounded.

Source: Stephen Fryard
http://www.theclassicalart.com/Presentation/Book/Pictorial_Submission.asp



When Victor is experimenting, he is in fact meddling with science. So he is meddling with the deepest secrets of nature, and of life processes. And this kind of meddling has tragic consequences. He does achieve his aim, he is successful in kind of finding, discovering the spark of life which gives birth to this monster. He is able to recreate life, put together life in this novel way from various body parts and he creates this new human being, but his heart is stricken at the outcome, because it is a monster that he has birthed, and he has produced and he kind of rejects the creature and runs away. And eventually, the creature also goes missing.

So, suddenly when Victor gets to hear about the death of his brother William, he realizes that who is behind the death of his brother, and Victor becomes extremely guilty, because someone else is kind of accused for the crime of murdering Victor's brother. And that person is also put to death. That is Justine Moritz and she is very innocent of this crime. So you can see how Victor becomes massively responsible for the deaths of innocent lives.

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The Plot



'The creature laments that he is lonely. His words are poignant: it becomes apparent that he is not innately evil. To his acute distress, the people he has encountered have reacted with terror and loathing; yet he is desperate to belong to a family.'

Source: (Shakespeare Forward)



The creature is very, very lonely, because there is nobody else like him and he laments that fact and the monster's words are poignant, it is very heartbreaking, when he kind of wants to be loved, seeks to be loved. And there is this argument that he is not perhaps innately evil, he is not really a monster, he is not born a monster, but he has been turned into one. And in fact the people who he tries to help also kind of reject him when they come to know who the actual helper is, the De Lacey family, they react with terror and loathing, and he is desperate to have a family of his own. So, that kind of desperation for companionship is kind of heart-rending.

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The Plot

Thus the creature is depicted as an innocent victim who becomes malign after being rejected by his maker and by society. He declares: 'I am malicious because I am miserable', and pleads with Victor to fashion a mate for him'.

Image source: <https://nptelx.org/2013/1/01/frankenstein-a-home/>

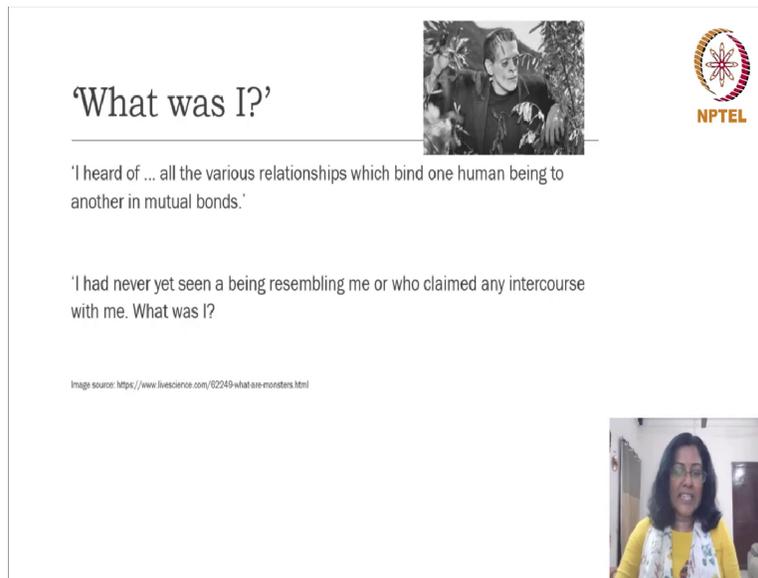
Source: (Stephanie Forward)



So you can kind of sense that this creature is depicted as an innocent victim, who becomes dangerous, who becomes really a threat to the security of human beings, after he has been rejected not only by his maker, but by society, as well the society with whom he tries to kind of relate in some ways and he declares that, the monster declare that, I am malicious, because I am miserable, and he pleads with Victor at one point to fashion a mate for him, to create a female for him, he wants his own Eve.

So, this kind of situation of the monster is something that is created by Victor and this creature did not ask to be made and if you can go back to the title page of this novel Frankenstein, you can remember those lines, which have been used by Shelley on the title page in which we see the lines which have been spoken by Adam, Adam who did not want to be made. So that similarity between the two are very, very striking and it is kind of provoked and evoked in the story through such moments.

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The slide features a title 'What was I?' in a serif font. To the right of the title is a small image of Frankenstein's monster. Below the title is a quote: 'I heard of ... all the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds.' Further down is another quote: 'I had never yet seen a being resembling me or who claimed any intercourse with me. What was I?'. At the bottom left, there is a small text source: 'Image source: <https://www.livescience.com/62249-what-are-monsters.html>'. In the top right corner, there is the NPTEL logo, which consists of a circular emblem with a stylized 'N' and 'P' and the text 'NPTEL' below it. In the bottom right corner, there is a small video inset showing a woman with glasses and a yellow top speaking.

And this desire for domesticity and companionship is something which is very significant and it seems to argue, the novel seems to argue that, if one is cut off from such kind of bond, such relationships, then that person will turn into evil. So Frankenstein's monster mentions that, states that "I heard of all the various relationships, which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds," I have come to know of all this, and it is very interesting that the monster is self taught, he gets all the quotes, he reads everything. He reads Paradise Lost also. So it is very, very significant that domesticity is key to one's good sense of righteousness, one's morality and all those elements which kind of keep you sane and happy and healthy. So he wants that, the creature wants that.

And he says that, "I had never yet seen a being resembling me or or who claimed any intercourse with me. What was I?" So he says that I can not see anybody mirroring me, anybody resembling me and nobody is keen to have any kind of conversation with me, any kind of relationship with me. What exactly am I? So these are the questions that kind of create a lot of cogency in the novel with relation to this creature.

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The Plot

'Later Victor destroys the female companion, causing the creature to seek revenge. Henry's violent demise is followed by the murder of Victor's bride, Elizabeth, and his father's death from grief'.

Source: (Stephanie Forward)



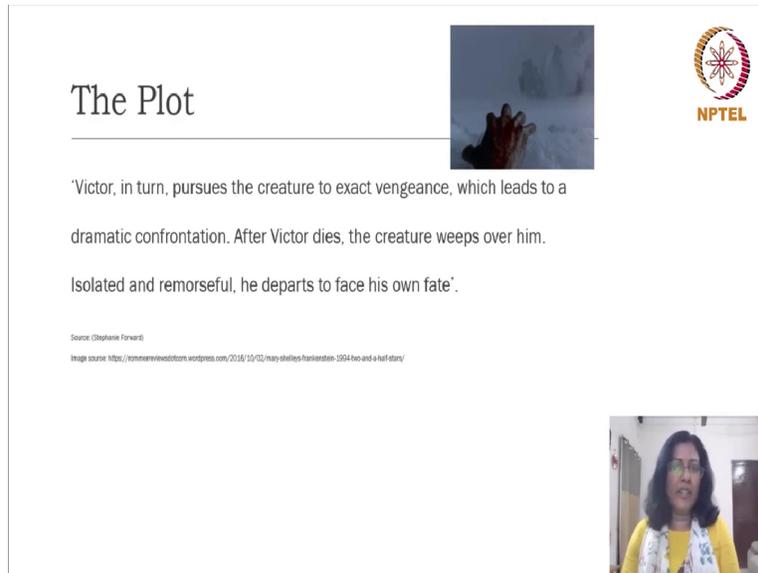
When Victor Frankenstein, hears the agony of this monster that he had created, he kind of agrees to create the female companion desired by his monster, and he tries to make such a creature and he is nearly on the verge of giving life to this female monster, when he kind of has a second thoughts about it, he suddenly worried as to the consequences of what this creation would mean for humanity? So what he does, he immediately puts an end to that female monster he kills her in front of the monster's eyes.

In fact, monster is watching this creation from outside, through the windows and he is ecstatic he is happy, he is grinning in a frightening manner. And that is when our Victor decides, okay, this is not a great idea and he puts an end to the female monster. And just makes, this act makes the monster go insane and several terrible consequences ensue for Victor, his friend is killed. Henry is killed and Frankenstein is accused of his murder and thrown into prison for a while and Frankenstein become seriously ill and later on when he recovers, when he is clear of the crime. He marries Elizabeth and the wife is killed by the monster as well.

And the father dies of grief, Victor's father dies of grief. So all these terrible consequences ensue because of that act of Victor of killing that female, the company that, the creature that the monster desired above anything else.

So you can see there is a kind of a repetition on horror, because of that one event of bringing to life the dead from various body parts.

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The Plot

'Victor, in turn, pursues the creature to exact vengeance, which leads to a dramatic confrontation. After Victor dies, the creature weeps over him. Isolated and remorseful, he departs to face his own fate'.

Source: (Shahane Forward)
Image source: <https://www.viewdof.com.wordpress.com/2016/10/02/nary-shalip-hankardite-3544-ko-and-a-half-atar/>



So, Victor decides to have his vengeance and he pursues the monster, across the Arctic ways and he kind of chases after him. And at one point, he is near to kind of meeting him then when the kind of the ice shell floats away and he is unable to get to that monster. So, at this point, he is terribly fatigued, he is exhausted and he has been and he is rescue by Robert Walton, who is on this Arctic expedition, and he takes him into his shed and kind of gives them succour. And that is how Victor narrates the tale to Robert Walton who in turn, narrates it to his sister at home.

So that is how the story has been set up. But eventually, Victor dies, exhausted, he dies and when he is dead, the creature returns and mourns over the body of his creator, his father. That is how he called him and he is extremely remorseful and he says that he from no one, no further pursuit in life for him and he is going to kill himself. He is isolating, he is extremely remorseful and kind of leads to face his own fate.

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The Creature

'The creature's account makes him appear vulnerable to the bombardment of sensations that greet him. Whereas Frankenstein's account suggests that he was horrific and a potentially dangerous being in phrases like 'the wretch', 'horrid contrast' and 'one hand was stretched out seemingly to detain me', the creature sounds fearful and harmless. He recalls feeling 'troubled', 'tormented' and 'half frightened'.

Source: Cambridge University Press, p.44


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And we kind of realize that he intends to kill himself on a funeral pyre on the Arctic. Now, if we think about the creature, it is very bizarre. It is horrible looking. It is not very pleasing to look at. I mean, how would it be pleasing, because that body has been put together by discarded body parts and this creates a lot of gothic effect. It is revolting, the horror is there. So it also connects him to other very horrifying gothic figures, suggest height for example, in RL Stevenson's Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

So, even though the gothic effect is there, there is an element of vulnerability and pathos that the creature evokes. The creature is without any doubt, really frightening and it does kill a lot of people, it murders a lot of people, it destroys families and all these, gory crimes have been done by him, yet he kind of evokes a lot of sympathy from readers, because of his language, he speaks in a very, very powerful potent, emotion driven language. And we can see that the narrative that the creature gives of his wanderings, the way he spends his time, make him feel vulnerable to the bombardment of sensations that greet him, because wherever he goes, everything is new to him. He is like a child. who has come into this world for the first time and he is kind of finding his way.

However, there is a contrast between how the Frankenstein monster, depicts himself and the way Frankenstein sees his own creature, the creature that he has created. So there is a difference

between the two narratives, the narratives of the creature about his own life, and Victor's narrative about the creature, he kind of sees the creature as horrific as very dangerous, potentially dangerous, and he describes him as the wretch, horrid he terms in as horribly different to the rest of the human beings in this world.

And when the creature kind of stretches out one hand, reaching out, reaching out to kind of meet his maker to kind of relate to his maker, the creator, Frankenstein kind of recoils and we kind of sense that, there is vulnerable, there is a fearfulness within the creature and he seems a harmless. But despite, his vulnerability, the rejections, the constant rejections, the irritations from society, the way he has been cut off very, very brutally from the world, kind of makes him troubled, tormented, half frightened and monstrous ultimately.

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The Women



'Elizabeth is the stepsister and betrothed of Victor.

Victor's mother, Caroline, adopted her from an impoverished peasant family in Italy.

On her deathbed, the mother made Elizabeth and Victor promise to marry. Elizabeth has no substance as a character.

She too is killed by The Monster on their wedding night.

Source: <http://scaly.com/education/42337/frankenstein/notes.pdf>

Image source: <https://frankensteinoneweekly.com/Elizabeth.html>



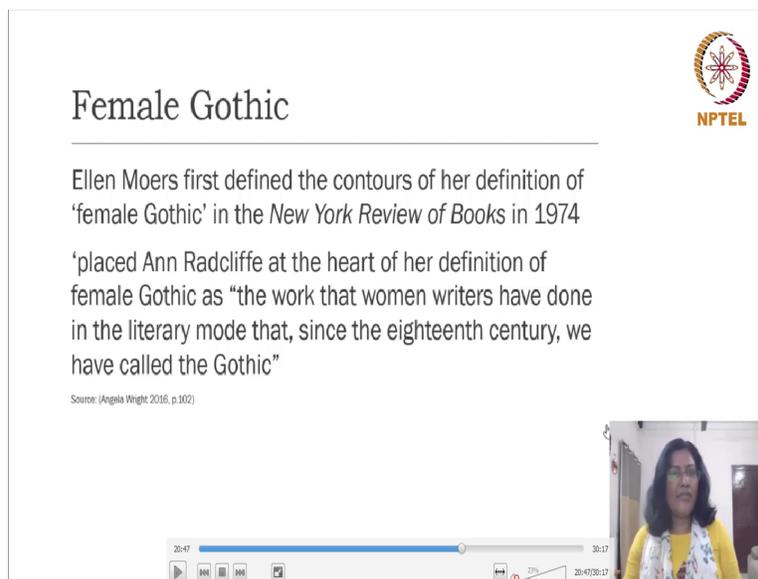
Now let us look at the women characters in the novel very, very quickly. The most important one is Elizabeth, who is the stepsister and betroth of Victor. In the 1818 edition, she is described as a distant cousin to Victor and in the 1831 edition, she is revised and referred to as the sister, who have been adopted by Victor's mother, an adopted sister.

So, you can see some minor revisions going on in relation to this particular character Elizabeth. So, the relative becomes, an impoverished child from peasant family in Italy who has been adopted by Victor's mother Caroline. So that is Elizabeth's context and she marries Victor. And

on the wedding day, she is also killed by the monster. Victor Frankenstein expects the monster to come for him. But to a surprise, it goes to Elizabeth and destroys her.

So, you can see how that the heterosexual family unit is destroyed by this creature. And it presents a potent threat to a kind of a happy domesticity because its own domesticity is thwarted. So it is revenge, a perfect revenge enacted by the creature on his maker. The creature's desire for a mate was destroyed by Victor, his father and the symbolic father and he kind of repeats, he kind of does the same thing and reeks vengeance on Victor by destroying his incipient domesticity by killing his wife Elizabeth.

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Female Gothic

Ellen Moers first defined the contours of her definition of 'female Gothic' in the *New York Review of Books* in 1974

'placed Ann Radcliffe at the heart of her definition of female Gothic as "the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic"

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.102)

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Now let us talk about the idea of the female gothic. Ellen Moers was the first critic to kind of define the idea of the female gothic in her *New York Review of Books* in 1974. And she placed Ann Radcliffe at the heart of her definition of female gothic. And she describes the terminology as referring to work that women writers have done in the literary mode, that since the 18th century, we have called the gothic. So work produced by women writers in the gothic genre are kind of referred to as female gothic.

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Female Gothic and Frankenstein



Only after Radcliffe did Moers cite Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and in arguing for the centrality of fear to the experience of women's Gothic, Moers had to resort to Mary Shelley's Preface to the 1831 edition of her novel in order to argue for its inclusion in the aesthetics of a women's Gothic: 'Mary Shelley said she intended *Frankenstein* to be the kind of ghost story that would "curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart."

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.102-103)



So after she cites Radcliffe, Ellen Moers cites Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and in arguing for the centrality of fear to the experience of women's gothic, Moers had to resort to Mary Shelley's Preface to the 1831 edition of her novel in order to argue for its inclusion in the aesthetics of a women's Gothic. So, if you see this argument, which has been put forth by Angela Wright, she says that Ellen Moers had the kind of make use of the preface, the 1831 preface that we discussed in the previous lecture. And that preface has been used by Ellen Moers to include this particular novel, *Frankenstein* by Shelley within the category of the female gothic.

And what did Mary Shelley say in that 1831 preface, very briefly Mary Shelley I quote had said, she intended *Frankenstein* to be the kind of ghost story that would "curdle the blood and quicken the beatings of the heart." So this kind of suspense, spine tingling, events that she seeks to produce in, *Frankenstein* events that would quicken the beatings of the heart are classic components of gothic fiction. And these elements are key to kind of labelling *Frankenstein* as belonging to the category of the female gothic.

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Female Gothic and Frankenstein



*Moers's 'Literary Women' (1976) separates the strands of Radcliffe's earlier form of female Gothic. This earlier form was characterized for Moers by a 'travelling heroinism' which differs from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which Moers acknowledges to be closer to a 'male Gothic' with its focus upon the Promethean over-reacher'*

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.103)



Now, Ellen Moers wrote *Literary Women*, published in 1976 kind of differentiates between different strands of female gothic. In an earlier form characterized by Radcliff, we have a kind of a travelling heroinism, heroinism is a term that we saw in the previous lecture. And it relates to a series of tests, moral tests that a heroine faces in order to prove herself, in order to grow up into a mature womanhood.

So, that is kind of a parallel to the male bildungsroman. So this kind of travelling heroinism is part of the female gothic kind of sketched out by Ann Radcliffe, but in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, we have a different kind and it is closer, this kind of gothic that Mary Shelley produced in *Frankenstein* is closer to a male gothic because of its focus on the Promethean over-reacher, one who overreaches one who is kind of steps out of the bounds of regulations and Prometheus, that kind of, is a figure who stole fire from the gods and gave it to the humans and for that he was punished.

So this kind of idea of overreaching is an idea that is embedded in the character of Victor Frankenstein, because he overreaches his limits and gives life to the dead and for that he has to face a series of consequences. He has to lose his beloved ones in the story. So, you can see how there is a connection for *Frankenstein* with the male gothic, but we can also very, very powerfully argue that it belongs to the female gothic as well.

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'Hideous Progeny' : The birth Myth

'Moers, and later Anne K. Mellor, have argued that the female author's self-effacement,

her later frank account of the 'blank incapability of invention' that confronted her at the Villa Diodati

when she was challenged to write a ghost story, speaks to the 'birth myth', or, as Mary Shelley herself owned it, her 'hideous progeny'

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.103)



Now how do we kind of associate it with the female Gothic, because there is a kind of a birth myth associated with the novel, right from the beginning. And let us see what that is. Ellen Moers and later and Anne K. Mellor have argued that the female author's self-effacement, she is kind of being very, very modest Mary Shelley is extremely modest in recording the narratives in Villa Diodati, remember the previous lecture, where these are literati met and discussed ghost stories and had this competition to produce a ghost story.

So, in that account that Mary gives, there is mention of her "blank incapability of inventions", she is not able to produce something which is of equal merit with the men. So, that kind of narrative is something that is connected to the female self-effacement. But when she is challenged, and when she kind of pushes herself, she does write a ghost story. And in that ghost story, we do get a birth myth. And Mary Shelley herself later called this particular novel as her hideous progeny. So it is as if she is giving birth to this novel, she has suffered a real loss, the loss of a child and she goes on to produce this hideous progeny in Frankenstein.

So all these factors kind of route the story in the birth myth and we kind of connected to the female gothic as well.

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Female Gothic and Frankenstein



'The novel's genesis became closely associated with procreation and gestation in that later account of Mary Shelley, and spoke to her anxieties concerning her parentage, and her own parenting.

The still hesitant inclusion of *Frankenstein* in a tradition of female Gothic writing is important, for it speaks to a broader anxiety about how to account for this novel in any gendered account of Gothic literature'.

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.103)



So, this novel's origin became closely associated, we understand the procreation, the idea of giving birth and gestation, in that later account of Mary Shelley, and it spoke to her anxieties concerning parentage, and her own parenting. So she lost a child and she was kind of estranged from her own father, her mother died when she was born. So there is a kind of an obsession one can say, with this idea of parenting and parentage in Frankenstein. Frankenstein kind of rejects his own child, the creature that he produced, and he refuses to be a good father, a guide to the child that he created. So that idea of parenting is symbolically discussed in the novel.

The still hesitant inclusion of Frankenstein, in a traditional female gothic is important. So there are critics who would kind of refused to put Frankenstein within the category of a female Gothic because of its connection with that, of male gothic, underlined by the notion of the overreaching Prometheus. And it also speaks to a broader anxiety, Frankenstein seeks to a broader anxiety about how to account for this novel in any gendered account of gothic literature. So the risen anxiety underlining this novel as to how to kind of place it, whether it is within the female gothic or the other kind. So that anxiety makes it complex and richer in terms of its meanings.

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Male pursuit narratives

'In critical accounts of the Gothic, there is instead a tendency to discuss *Frankenstein* alongside the male pursuit narratives offered in William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) and the later examples of Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824).'

Source: (Angela Wright 2016, p.104)



The novel, *Frankenstein* is clearly also discussed within the category of male pursuit narratives, *Frankenstein* pursuing the monster that he created in order to wreak vengeance on him. So this novel is categorized as a pursuit narrative within this gothic genre, male pursued narrative and we have other examples in William Godwin's, *Caleb Williams* published in 1794. And we have other examples such as Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* 1820, and James Hogg's, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* in 1824.

So what we understand from this kind of critical context to *Frankenstein* is that there is an argument for this novel to be classified as a female gothic and the 1831 preface plays a crucial role there, because it talks about the idea of giving birth. And it is a wonderful literary birth and it is not a normal birth. It is an abnormal book, because Mary Shelley calls it, her hideous progeny, just as *Frankenstein* kind of feels that the progeny that he created is hideous, it is horrid. So that kind of parallel is drawn when we kind of categorize it as female gothic.

However this novel can also be connected to the male gothic because of this idea of promethean figure who is connected to *Frankenstein*, because *Frankenstein* did something, which he should not have, he kind of displeased the God, he displeased nature by giving life in this scientific manner. And it can also be categorized as a pursuit narrative and because it kind of pursues

things. Frankenstein pursues this creature, Robert Walton, this arctic explorer pursues a north-western sea passage, which would make him extremely famous. So all these trajectories are useful in classifying the novel in various ways, but we ultimately understand that the novel has multiple meanings. It is very fertile in that regard and it continues to challenge us.

Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.