

The Popular Gothic Novel
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Lecture - 61
Overview of Frankenstein and Jane Eyre

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Week 12

Lecture 12D: Overview of Frankenstein and Jane Eyre



Good day to all. So welcome to Week 12 Lecture. In today's lecture, I wanted to give a brief overview of two novels that we have already covered in this course. So they are Frankenstein and Jane Eyre. And before I get into it, I wanted to give like a brief introduction to these writers as well.

So we have Mary Shelley who wrote Frankenstein and Charlotte Bronte who wrote Jane Eyre. Let us start with Mary Shelley. So Mary Shelley was the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. William Godwin was a radical philosopher, who was a well-read, well-educated man. And Mary Wollstonecraft, she was in fact the writer of *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which is considered to be the first feminist text in literature.

So you can clearly see that Mary Shelley comes from a family, from a household that is very educated, very literary, very radical for her time. And this obviously had a huge influence on her and her writing. William Godwin was a huge influence. Her father was a huge influence in her life. And later on, she married Percy Shelley. And Percy Shelley we know is a very prominent writer of the romantic period.

So these people, this atmosphere she had growing up and the people she was around, these very literary people, put a huge influence on her and her writing. So now, a little context about how Frankenstein came to be. So it was a result of a ghostwriting competition.

So Mary Shelley and her husband, along with some friends, they were staying at Villa Diodati in Lake Geneva. So there was Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley, Claire Clairmont, and Polidori, and Lord Byron. And they were reading horror stories, they were reading horror poems. It was the year without summer. The environment climate at that time was also very conducive, very Gothic in a sense.

So at this time, they were all staying at Villa Diodati and they were reading these very Gothic horror stories. In fact, one of the things mentioned in the earlier lecture was they were reading *Christabel* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and in fact scared Percy Shelley so much that he had to leave the room. So this was the general environment in which *Frankenstein* came to be.

Mary Shelley was a keen observer, she was a keen listener. So at Villa Diodati, all these people, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, they were having discussions; they were having these very philosophical discussions. They were talking about scientific matters. So Mary Shelley was keenly listening to these things. And she was very fascinated, she was very taken by these discussions, as she was with the general contemporary discussions of her time.

So there was a keen interest in Doctor Darwin's scientific experiments. People were very fascinated by galvanism, human anatomy was being learned more and more. So there was, you know, there was a phenomenon of body snatchers who went into graveyards, trying to get bodies to experiment on them because there were not enough bodies.

So this was the general climate of the time. And Mary Shelley, you know, she was very fascinated by all of these things. And hence, you can see the clear elements of her interest in the Gothic, her interest in science fiction. And these things reflect in the story, in the plot of *Frankenstein*. So hence, we can see how this context helps us to understand *Frankenstein* a little better.

The same manner, I want to talk a little bit about Charlotte Bronte as well. So she was the third child of Patrick Bronte and she grew up with six siblings. Her mother died when she was really young. So her mother died when she was five years old.

So you can see how this, you know, this *Jane Eyre* was an orphan. You can see the small influence that Charlotte Bronte also lost her mother quite young. You can see these small influences in the story as well. Bronte studied in the Clergy Daughters' School. And this school was a very harsh, difficult, painful, and terrible school.

She, in fact, lost her two sisters, older sisters there. They passed away because of these harsh conditions. And it is a very well-known fact that she was inspired to write, to create this Lowood School and it was based on Clergy Daughters' School. And Charlotte was only 8 years old when she went there.

In Jane Eyre, you can see how Jane was only 10 years old when she was sent to Lowood School. And she was considered to be very young and it was considered like she was too young to be sent to school like that. So again, you can see the very close resemblances between Bronte and Jane Eyre.

Like I have already mentioned, her mother passed away. Her two older sisters passed away. So death was a constant, death had a constant appearance in their family. So there was this always underlying anxiety revolving around death that is again reflected in Charlotte Bronte's writing.

After the Clergy Daughters' School, she was, she came back home and there, she received a very good education. So her father and Mary's sister, Elizabeth, they took charge of this kin and they gave them a very wide-ranging and stimulating education. So you will have to imagine that Charlotte grew up with her three sisters, these three insanely creative, talented writers; Charlotte, Ann, and Emily.

So they grew up in this house together and they received this really good education, where they were encouraged to read. And these sisters along with their brother, they were very creative and they invented this very complicated, complex, imaginary world.

They did a lot of creative writing, they wrote in their tiny handmade notebooks. So you can see that this creative spark, this creative impulse has been there right from Bronte's childhood. And after that, she went on to Roe Head School and she was a teacher there as well. Again, you can see a very close resemblance to Jane Eyre being a teacher at Lowood School.

And Bronte as an adult worked as a governess for a long time. And this again is such a close resemblance to Jane Eyre. In fact, you can see clearly that Bronte, she wrote about things that she could relate to, she saw around her. She dug into her own life and her own life experiences and that allowed Jane Eyre to have such a rich inner life.

When you read the novel, you can see how beautifully and how realistically these characters in her life are described. And it is clearly reflective of Charlotte Bronte's upbringing. So in

this manner, you can see how these both writers, they were very, they grew up in families, where they were encouraged to some extent to pursue their creative pursuits and endeavours. And they were well-educated, they were well-read.

So these things helped them in some manner to write these fantastic tales. Now, I will go more into detail about these tales in the coming time. So let us start with Frankenstein first.

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Frankenstein



- Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus
- Lines from Paradise Lost
- Nesting - Epistolary Novel
- Female Gothic
- Absence/Silence of Females
- Gothic landscapes

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One of the things I wanted to go over first was the cover page itself of the novel. It gives a lot of details as to what is to come in the rest of the novel. So the full title of the book is Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus. So it draws on the myth of Prometheus. And you can see how relevant it is to the story, the pursuit of forbidden knowledge. And it foreshadows the things to come.

You can also find lines from Paradise Lost in the cover page. And this is also very important because one, we see in the course of the novel that Paradise Lost is one of the novels that the creature reads. And it is also very relevant to the theme of the novel. The creature questioning his maker and the relationship between the creature and the maker.

So from this cover page itself, we get to learn a lot about Frankenstein and what the novel is about. Another important thing to go over is the understanding of why Frankenstein is considered a Gothic novel. So from the 1831 preface, this is made abundantly clear because, in it, we can see Mary Shelley herself describe how she wants to generate pleasure through the exploitation of fear, suspense, and horror.

So with Frankenstein, she intended to write a tale, a story that will make the reader get excited and through suspense, get them anxious and worried. And in this manner, exploit or make them feel a certain kind of pleasure that comes with it.

So she includes the elements of supernatural, horror, and so on in order to do the same. So even though Frankenstein is generally considered a science fiction novel, this reaffirms the fact that it belongs very rightly in the Gothic tradition as well.

Next, what I wanted to highlight were the main techniques of forms adapted by Shelley in writing this novel. So the novel uses the Gothic technique of nesting, that is, the stories are embedded within stories. To do this, Shelley uses the form of the epistolary novel.

So the novel is primarily composed in the form of letters. When we read the novels, we see how it starts with Robert Walton, writing letters to his sister. The use of this form or technique gives us the reader, multiple entry points into the story. We get to see the story be told from various points of view, from various perspectives. And this is a very useful narrative tool in this manner.

I wanted to also discuss again the idea of the female Gothic. So when we read the novel, we see how the story is centred around the male characters and the male narrative. We noticed the centrality of the main male character that is Frankenstein. And there is a lot of focus also on the Promethean overreaching theme or on the male pursuit narrative.

And because of these reasons, sometimes Frankenstein is not seen in the female Gothic tradition. But it would not be right to completely dismiss Frankenstein from the female Gothic tradition because you can clearly see, there are some elements of the female Gothic in the novel.

For example, you can see how Mary Shelley herself describes this novel to be her progeny, her hideous, ugly, progeny. So there is this whole birth myth, the idea of procreation that is connected with novel. And Frankenstein has created this creature. He is the father of the creature, he is the God to this creature.

So this idea of birthing the creature and the anxiety of parenting and parentage, he is worried constantly about what his creature might or might not do. So these things clearly show that Frankenstein does belong to the female Gothic tradition.

Next, I wanted to also discuss about the presence or rather the absence of female voices in Frankenstein. There is a relative silence of the women in the novel. We do not hear much from them. When the novel begins, it is with letters that are addressed to the sister of Robert Walton. But the sister does not really materialize over the calls of the novel. We do not hear from her, we do not hear her opinions or her understanding of the subject, nothing of that sort happens.

Also as the novel proceeds, we see that almost all of the women die by the end of the novel. Elizabeth dies, Justine dies, the female creature that Frankenstein has created also is killed or destroyed by Frankenstein himself. So we can see clearly how all these female characters are either directly or indirectly killed off because of Frankenstein. It is the man who seems to take away the lives of these women. And the sentiment is captured very clearly and succinctly in one of Elizabeth's lines in the novel.

She says men appeared to me as monsters, thirsting for each other's blood. So it becomes very evident how men in the story and their pursuits become a sort of the reason this fate befalls the women in the novel.

And finally, I also wanted to take a look at the Gothic landscape; the mountains, the lakes. All of these are so important to the Gothic mode. The descriptions that Mary Shelley gives of these landscapes are, they follow the romantic tradition of the vivid nature imagery. And it adds a lot to the setting and to the mood of the story.

And this mood, the ambience, the setting, the lightning, the thunderstorm, all these create that Gothic atmosphere. It builds the suspense. It is what thrills the readers so much. So with this, I want to move on to the next novel that I would like to discuss and that is Jane Eyre.

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Jane Eyre



- Incarceration
- Gothic house - Thornfield Hall
- Bertha Mason - "other"
- Imperial Gothic
- Feminist Literary Criticism on Madness
- Gothic Rebellion

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And I think the first thing I would want to discuss is one of the first incidents that happened in the book, and that is the incident in the red room. So here, Jane Eyre, who is just 10 years old, and this 10-year old child is locked up in this room and she passes out.

Jane Eyre is a very wilful, strong-willed child, and it is one of the few moments in the story that she is literally begging. She asks to please be let outside from this room. So the idea of incarceration is very prominent in Jane Eyre and it repeatedly occurs through the story.

So to some extent, it also appears in the, in Lowood School, when Jane Eyre goes there and there are tall walls that do not let her really to see the outside world and that cuts her off. And it is again another sort of incarceration that happens. But again, I think the most vivid and explicit way this idea of incarceration would be presented is in the case of that Bertha Mason.

She is literally a prisoner in her own house. She locked up and she is kept in the attic of Thornfield Hall. So from here, I would like to go talk a little bit more about the Gothic house that is Thornfield Hall. In very base terms, I would call it spooky. Like Thornfield Hall is a very Gothic house.

There always seems to be some sort of spectral presence in the house. Even though we later find out that many of the incidents are caused by Bertha, there is this dark, very Gothic, very horror inducing, very supernatural undertone that always surround all the things that happened in Thornfield. And also, very noteworthy is the fact that very little religious activity that are so fundamental to a country house like this happens in Thornfield Hall.

And as Madam has mentioned in her earlier lecture, the very name Thornfield, it is not a bed of roses for Jane Eyre. And Bronte describes Thornfield so vividly as well. So it also adds onto this Gothic romance because it is set inside this very Gothic house that is Thornfield Hall.

Yes. Next, I want to talk about the othering of Bertha Mason, and this can be read in a better manner in the light of the Imperial Gothic. So the othering of Bertha Mason happens because she does not technically belong to the British-purebred community. She belongs to a colony. She is an outsider in this manner.

And we can see how the outsider is presented in this novel. The exoticization, the hyper-sexualization, and the distinct othering of her from the other pure-British blood. So this imperial style, imperial take on allows us to understand why Bertha is seen in this manner and why she is represented in this manner.

And also, there is the element of St. John, who wants to go as a missionary to India. So these things formed a part of a cohesive narrative that was very prominent during that time about British and their colonies and the kind of power that Britain exerted over their colonies.

Another important thing that I wanted to again discuss is the feminist literary criticism surrounding madness that is very important to understand. Again, for Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre, this idea of madness is a very complicated, complex, and problematic one. And many theoreticians and academicians have tried to formulate arguments, trying to understand why madness is seen in this particular way and why madness is portrayed in this particular way in Jane Eyre.

So the very first fact is that madness is seen as going against femininity. So the reason why Bertha Mason is not considered feminine enough to be Rochester's wife is because she is mad. So this simple fact of her madness completely takes away her femininity. But this argument can also be seen in the light of the fact that madness can be seen as a rebellion against these standards of femininity.

So during the 19th century, there were certain notions of how women were supposed to be, how women were supposed to present themselves. So there were very set understanding of what it means to be feminine. So in that sense, being mad was a rebellion against these understood ideas, understood ways of looking at femininity. So this is another way of looking at madness here.

Another aspect of this is that this valorization of madness also guarantees continued oppression. So you can see how there are multitudes of ways to look at how madness, what madness implies in the story, and why Bertha Mason's madness is so important and complex in understanding. And it helps us to understand better the society at that time and how women were treated at that time. So this was another thing.

And finally Gothic rebellion. So like Bertha Mason, Jane Eyre is also not your typical woman character in a novel. She is very strong-willed, she is very sure about herself. As a child, she speaks against tyranny. She does not fear adult tyranny and she is very okay. I mean, it bothers her, but she is very fine with raising her voice and making her position clear that she does not agree with what Mrs. Reed is saying.

So Jane Eyre goes against the set standards of what it to be a child as well here. She is constantly rebelling and very disinclined to follow some norms and societal rules as to how women should behave in society. And so, in this manner, we can see that there is clear rebellion, a clear going against traditions, in a manner that is very strong-willed in Jane Eyre; the central character Jane Eyre.

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Common Threads

- Influence of the existing literature - Fantasmagoriana & Bluebeard
- Dehumanisation
- The tragic adventures following exits
- Landscape - travelling
- Supernatural elements



Now, I would also like to look at some common threads. So as you come to the end of this course, you will be able to draw a lot of similarities between these novels that we have done. And here, I just wanted to make some, draw some connections between the two novels that I have already discussed here.

So, for example, in both the novels, both the writers, Mary Shelley and Charlotte Bronte, they are very inspired and influenced by the existing literature. So they are very taken by this horror, by this dark, mysterious, Gothic literature.

Mary Shelley clearly says that she was very inspired by the German ghost stories that they had been reading in Villa Diodati, and in Jane Eyre, Bronte uses this French folklore, this French or horror folklore of Bluebeard in the story itself.

So we can clearly see that these writers, who were very fascinated by this Gothic style of storytelling and hence, they very willingly and knowingly wrote these beautiful Gothic stories and novels. The second thing that is common to both these stories, both these novels is this element of dehumanization.

So when we read Frankenstein, when we come towards the part where the creature is describing his adventures and so forth, we can see, there is a very inherent humanness in this creature. He feels joy, he feels sadness, and he feels all these very human emotions. But Frankenstein consistently dehumanizes the creature in the manner he describes the creature, in the way he treats the creature.

And this is not just restricted to Frankenstein. We can also see everyone around him, the society, the people he meets, everyone consistently dehumanizes the creature simply because of the fact that he does not look like the rest of the humans.

And this thread is also visible in Jane Eyre in Bertha Mason. Because of her madness, Bertha is completely dehumanized. They do not see her even as a human, forget a woman. So madness becomes the reason as to why she is dehumanized in Jane Eyre. And this dehumanization is very visible in ways like Frankenstein's creature does not get a name. There is no name that is ever given to him. He is always referred to as the creature or the monster.

And in Bertha Mason's case, she never gets the name she rightfully should get, that is, Mrs. Rochester. She is always addressed as Bertha Mason. So this very fact that they do not get the names that they deserve, shows how they are dehumanized in the story.

Another common thing you can notice is the tragic adventure that follows exists. So, for example, in Frankenstein, when the creature leaves the lab, he is forced into a world that is very uncomfortable to him. And Shelley describes this beautifully and painfully; his struggles

with nature itself, in terms of weather, his inability to like make food and get food from somewhere. And everything, it is painful, it is miserable, it is difficult for him.

And the same thing as seen when Jane Eyre escapes or ran away from Thornfield as well. A couple of days when until she finally received accommodation, she struggles, she is hungry, she is starving, she is miserable and it is very difficult. So these very painful adventures are a part of this novel.

And like I had already spoken about in Frankenstein section, the landscape is as important in both these stories. There is a lot of traveling involved in Frankenstein, as well as, Jane Eyre. And every time they reach a new place, there is so much description, there is such a vivid description of the imagery of nature, of the things around. So this landscape description is all very important and it is commonly found in both these novels.

And finally supernatural elements. So by virtue of being Gothic novels, obviously there is a dark, mysterious, horror, supernatural underlying tone to both of this novel. But what I wanted to specifically mention this because there were two instances in Frankenstein. As he comes back here, as he is driving back home, he can feel the creature, he can feel the existence of the creature. He knows that the creature has committed the crime. And he knows, he can literally feel the presence of the creature.

And in Jane Eyre, she can actually hear Rochester call out to her. She can feel Rochester calling out to her in Jane Eyre. So these are some supernatural elements that are not really explained away, whereas in other instances, in Jane Eyre especially, all such incidents have some reasonable explanations, which are given later on. But these are some supernatural elements that remain as the supernatural.

So yes, these were some of the things from the two novels that I wanted to discuss again. Thank you.