
Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: Feminine Spaces and the Creation-Creator Conundrum in Gothic Reality

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Abstract

The standard dungeon and corridor landscape of an old Castle, favoured absolutely and unquestioningly by the Gothic genre is overwhelmingly an indoor location which is much more conducive for a female protagonist. Historically, the practitioners of the Gothic have always somehow stuck to the patriarchal construct of a woman's life within the walls and oppressive protection of domesticity.

KEYWORDS: Gothic, Frankenstein, Castles, Vasari, Feminine, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

It is a salient feature of Gothic writings that the predominance of fantasy of a reality is an acknowledged fact. The precedence of the supernatural over the natural and the putting forward of the strange above and beyond the realm of the common place is a very common feature of Gothic writings of all ages. In a strangely inverse proposition, the horror and terror in Gothic does not serve a purpose in the catharsis of the said emotions but they serve as the highlights and the unique selling points of the tomes in which they reside.

In one of the most famous instances of a writer expressing his views on gothic writings, Sir Walter Scott had equated the reading of Mrs. Radcliffe with the taking of drugs. The tension of horror and the page turning urges inherent in the structuring of a gothic tale might justify such a comparison. To go for a specific instance, a number of critics have single doubt Mrs Radcliffe for her so called incantatory style.

The pictorial representation of antiquity and the holding of suspense over a lengthy time frame in the course of the plotline have also situated Mrs Radcliffe on a unique pedestal of Gothic authors. From a different point of view Mary Shelley and her Frankenstein follow a markedly divergent path. The pure Gothic may have a certain obligation towards the structuring of the plot being an absolute page turner. The author of Frankenstein has chosen a totally different path of introspection and deeper inquiry into the mysteries of creation. Many have read Frankenstein as a warning against the usurpation of the sacred divine by the empirical and experimental human intellect.

The visually spectacular and the abominable come face to face in Frankenstein as a reminder of the fact that the creation is not always the model that the creator

wanted. Indeed, Mary Shelley intended that the readers of her Gothic tale understand that the positivity of creation might somehow lead to the inevitable negativity of the unwanted. The process of birth is not a very pleasant one whether we look at it from a physiological or an anatomical viewpoint. Perhaps this very idea is also presented in a very indirect form in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the relation between the creator and the created creature is not a painless one.

To manage the references and the location of the spaces in a gothic novel it is quite plausible to make the assumption that a landscape of horror and suspense is not naturally conducive for a female protagonist. A question might come up that why does a Gothic novel even do such a thing. We must understand that there is no simple and direct answer to that problem because the evolution of Gothic has shown that a number of divergent plot lines and characters will always justify the fact that it is impossible to formulate any standard empirical equation which will untangle the complexity and diversity of a full-blooded Gothic tale into a number of easily readable bullet points. The standard dungeon and corridor landscape of an old Castle, favoured absolutely and unquestioningly by the Gothic genre is overwhelmingly an indoor location which is much more conducive for a female protagonist. Historically, the practitioners of the Gothic have always somehow stuck to the patriarchal construct of a woman's life within the walls and oppressive protection of domesticity. Braving a jungle or climbing a rugged mountain was the standard realm of the male adventurer.

The Gothic style of architecture was quite popular in Europe from the late 12th to the 16th centuries. The pointed arch of Gothic architecture was one of the most salient characteristics of the genre. Christian ecclesiastical architecture and Gothic cathedrals and churches have much in common but the term Gothic originated as a derogatory or a pejorative term. One of the historical proponents of this derogatory terminology was Giorgio Vasari, the famous Renaissance polymath. He is also the originator of the phrase "barbarous German style". History has equated the Goths with the destroyers of the Roman empire and the overwhelming force that destroyed the ancient examples of Greek and Roman architecture. So, in historical and literary terms the Gothic is a tradition of culture being trampled under the foot of the uncultured. The substitution of one architectural style by another is nothing new in the history of architecture but the reference and relations to the fall of the ancient Roman empire have always cast the Goths and the Gothic in a harsh light.

The treatment of the Gothic in *Frankenstein* follows a unique path because the author somehow gave birth to fiction as Gothic fantasy other than a realistic account of life and its variations. In the 18th and 19th centuries there were very few important female writers who actually wrote about the process of giving birth or

anything related. Naturalism came quite late and somehow washed away the taboo regarding physical sexuality. Pregnancy, delivery and labour somehow became not too distant topics for a literary theme. Mary Shelley showed the light on a different path with the creation and exposition of the so called mad scientist who locks himself away in a clandestine lab and devotes his laborious days and nights towards the creation of life. Metaphorical speaking, the parallels between romantic creation and human birth somehow blurs in between. The monster has dull yellow eyes with matching yellow skin which highlighted the tangled network of muscles and arteries beneath it. The creator is repulsed by the creation. This repulsion is somehow in contrasted motif against the feminine. It is actually the birth of a new life but the giver of life is not elated. A deep dread and foreboding of the calamitous future sets in quite early. The reader is shocked to find the absolute absence of maternal love, parental ecstasy or the sense of fulfillment which accompanies such an event in real life. The departure from the domestic and feminine is somehow very much evident at this point.

It must be remembered that the age in which Gothic novels had their highest circulations was an age which defined the feminine in a condescendingly patriarchal view point. In a strictly literary sense, the Gothic and the feminine are polar opposites. The modern reinvention of the Gothic have shown us that this view point is a totally obsolete one but the reading audience of the age was convinced otherwise. Moreover, the Gothic and the Teutonic were more invested in military and ideological terminologies which do not correspond with the domestic or the feminine. Therefore, in order to define Gothic architectural spaces, the audience or the critic must reevaluate the workings of the Gothic novel with the modern illumination of the boundaries of the feminine. The usage of the word boundary might somehow point towards the intrinsic existence of a patriarchal mindset. It has to be remembered that no writing is absolutely free from intertextual dependencies.

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