

Frankenstein – The Gothic Novel

Frankenstein is by no means the first Gothic novel. Instead, this novel is a compilation of Romantic and Gothic elements combined into a singular work with an unforgettable story. The Gothic novel is unique because by the time Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, several novels had appeared using Gothic themes, but the genre had only been around since 1754.

The first Gothic horror novel was *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, published in 1754. Perhaps the last type of novel in this mode was Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, published in 1847. In between 1754 and 1847, several other novels appeared using the Gothic horror story as a central story telling device, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1794) by Ann Radcliffe, *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew G. Lewis, and *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) by Charles Maturin.

Gothic novels focus on the mysterious and supernatural. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley uses rather mysterious circumstances to have Victor create the monster: the cloudy circumstances under which Victor gathers body parts for his experiments and the use of little known modern technologies for unnatural purposes. Shelley employs the supernatural elements of raising the dead and macabre research into unexplored fields of science unknown by most readers. She also causes us to question our views on Victor's use of the dead for scientific experimentation. Upon hearing the story for the first time, Lord Byron is said to have run screaming from the room, so the desired effect was achieved by Mary Shelley.

Gothic novels also take place in gloomy places like old buildings (particularly castles or rooms with secret passageways), dungeons, or towers that serve as a backdrop for the mysterious circumstances. A familiar type of Gothic story is, of course, the ghost story. Also, faraway places that seem mysterious to the readers function as part of the Gothic novel's setting. *Frankenstein* is set in continental Europe, specifically Switzerland and Germany, where many of Shelley's readers had not been. Further, the incorporation of the chase scenes through the Arctic regions takes us even further from England into regions unexplored by most readers. Likewise, *Dracula* is set in Transylvania, a region in Romania near the Hungarian border. Victor's laboratory is the perfect place to create a new type of human being. Laboratories and scientific experiments were not known to the average reader, thus this was an added element of mystery and gloom.

Just the thought of raising the dead is gruesome enough. Shelley takes full advantage of this literary device to enhance the strange feelings that *Frankenstein* generates in its readers. The thought of raising the dead would have made the average reader wince in disbelief and terror. Imagining Victor wandering the streets of Ingolstadt or the Orkney Islands after dark on a search for body parts adds to the sense of revulsion purposefully designed to evoke from the reader a feeling of dread for the characters involved in the story.

In the Gothic novel, the characters seem to bridge the mortal world and the supernatural world. *Dracula* lives as both a normal person and as the undead, moving easily between both worlds to accomplish his aims. Likewise, the *Frankenstein* monster seems to have some sort of communication between himself and his creator, because the monster appears wherever Victor goes. The monster also moves with amazing superhuman speed with Victor matching him in the chase towards the North Pole. Thus, Mary Shelley combines several ingredients to create a memorable novel in the Gothic tradition.