

**Mary Shelley's Frankenstein**  
**Professor Dr. Divya A. Dohss**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**  
**Lecture 15**  
**Historical and Literary Contexts**

(Refer Slide Time: 00:11)

# Week 3: Frankenstein



LECTURE 3E: HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS

IMAGE SOURCE: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/zeronegill/1288888888/>



Hello, and welcome to this week's lecture on Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. In this lecture, I am going to talk briefly about the historical and literary contexts that are associated with this gothic novel. We look at the romantics as well, as a philosophy very briefly and we will take a quick look at some discussion questions as well.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:39)

## Historical Events



• 1789: "the start of the French revolution (an attempt of the French people to rid themselves of their absolute monarchy). British liberals were excited that the common people were standing up to their oppressors, but they quickly became disillusioned when the revolution became very bloody and its leaders became tyrants themselves.

• 1793 through 1794: the French Reign of Terror under Robespierre. British liberals lost all hope for true justice and equality in that year.

• 1804: Napoleon is crowned Emperor."

(Source: Rebecca Grudzina 2004)



Now, the key historical events that are associated with the gothic novel and its rise are these. 1789 is considered to be the start of the French revolution and it is an attempt of the French people to rid themselves of their absolute monarchy. So it is a kind of a radical political struggle, which is seeking a lot of drastic change to the way the society is run. British liberals were excited that the common people were standing up to their oppressors, but they quickly became disillusioned when the revolution became very bloody and its leaders became tyrants themselves.

So, across the English channel, Great Britain and its liberals particularly were excited by the prospect that things are going to change for the better, for the oppressed people, but then they became very disillusioned. The romantics particularly became disillusioned when the revolution became extremely violent and the so-called leaders were becoming tyrants and dictators themselves.

The dates, if you look at the year 1793 to 1794, there was this reign of terror under Robespierre which was unleashed on the country. British liberals lost all hope for true justice and equality in that year. So the kind of idealism that was associated with the

revolution was shattered for the romantics, especially the English romantics. 1804 saw the crowning of Napoleon as the emperor of France.

So, all these dates are interesting and significant because we somehow associate the idea of terror that is depicted in the early gothic fiction to the terror unleashed during the French revolution. So, some of the complications and complexities associated with the political ideals are kind of subtly connected with the rise of this kind of literary sub-genre which we call the gothic.

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## Nature



"Romantic writers were turning towards nature as an escape from the harsh realities of their world. Nature was someplace where human tyranny did not reign"

(Source: Rebecca Grudzina 2004)

Source: <https://1.cdn.edl.io/d6vtQNLh06fhd3DvQPuIE15y5h78tD2YgWxW0qP5Y0TU.pdf>



Now, the romantic writers were turning towards nature as an escape from the harsh realities of their worlds. Nature was someplace where human tyranny did not reign. So this nature worship is crucial both for the romantics as well as for the gothic narrative. We can see a lot of extensive descriptions of nature in gothic fiction and nature seems a haven as well as a kind of a discourse, a topic and an entity which can provoke ideas of sublimity in the person who is appreciating, enjoying these elements of nature.

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## The Romantics

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- The Romantics were, for the most part, disheartened liberals.
- They sought solitude in nature, believing that the key to all emotional healing could be found in nature. Nature imagery is the most predominant feature of Romantic literature.

(Source: Rebecca Grudzina 2004)



Now, the idea is that subject of nature is common to both the romantics as well as the gothic writers which is why we are discussing the romantics here and the connection with the gothic novel is something that we should be aware of. The romantics were for the most part disheartened liberals. And we saw how during the French revolution, the ideals of the revolution were shattered by the leaders who led the revolution and this kind of disheartened the liberals who were watching the progression of the revolution.

So there is a close connection between the French revolution, the romantics and the gothic writers. Of course, the gothic kind of develop into something else as it was kind of written and adapted and reshaped and continued to be accommodated in various ways in different centuries. So, but the essential idea of reacting to oppression in a particular way is a trajectory that continues to be one of the characteristics of gothic fiction.

Now, to get back to the idea of nature, the romantics sought solitude in nature, believing that the key to all emotional healing could be found in nature. Nature imagery is the most predominant feature of romantic literature. So, the idea of isolation finding peace in solitude, especially in the lap of nature is something that is very, very strong in romantic literature. You can think about Wordsworth, Shelly, Keats and the representation of nature

is varied and they all have a common theme of nature being somehow a spirit that guides humanity that kind of keeps the humans company in various ways.

So nature imagery is a very prominent feature of romantic literature. Of course, the representation of nature in Wordsworth is different to the representation of nature in say for example, Shelly, but we do understand that nature is a strong spirit, which kind of walks hand in hand with the human races.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:18)

## The Disenfranchised Man

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"The idea of the disenfranchised man was also very common. Such men, who found them-selves unable to live in society, were often revered and/or sympathized with."

(Source: Rebecca Gratzna 2004)



The idea of the disenfranchised man is also a common principle that is treated in romantic literature. So, it is a common topic, a common subject. So, such men, the un-free men, the disenfranchised means somebody who is in chains metaphorically, and this figure the disenfranchised or the chained man finds himself unable to live in society and this figure was usually sympathized with a lot and almost revered in romantic literature. So this figure is something we need to keep in mind. And we also talk about the gothic novel, where we find similar figures who are bound literally and metaphorically.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:09)

## The Disenfranchised Man

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"Frankenstein and his creature are both disenfranchised men—the creature because his form keeps him from any human company, and Frankenstein because he eventually feels that he cannot enjoy the company of his fellow men after unleashing a monster among them".

(Source: Rebecca Grudzina 2004)



With reference to Frankenstein the disenfranchised men referred to two figures both Frankenstein and his creation and they are both disenfranchised, both chained in some ways the creature, the monster, because its form keeps him from any human company. He is bound because of its very nature the creature is so horrifying to look at, so hideous. So, unlike his compatriot, or unlike the rest of society that he cannot relate to anybody else.

So he is chained by the very fact of his being. And Frankenstein, the creator, the scientist is also chained because he feels, he eventually feels that he cannot enjoy the company of his fellow men because of what he did through his experiments, because he created a monster and let it loose among society.

He is unable to have any kind of rapport with the rest of society, with his own family because of the complications which arise from the acts of the monster. For example, this monster literally and metaphorically kills companions that Frankenstein could have had. He kills off Elizabeth who could have been his wife. He kills off his friend. So, he kills his brother. The father of Frankenstein dies because of these kind of miseries.

So you can see how the monster is kind of eliminating his relations and his connections with society in a very literal manner. So these are some of the ideas that we can think

about in relation to the disenfranchised man, a concept that is treated very much in romantic literature and which does get treated in different ways in gothic fiction.

So, you can see how the gothic is connected to the romantic narrative in these ways, nature being one, the idea of the disenfranchised man, in terms of nature you can also think about how nature gets represented in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily St. Aubert, Valancourt, St. Aubert everybody, they kind of appreciate nature. There is an element of the picturesque painted in words on the pages of the novel. In *Frankenstein*, we can see how the Arctic ways are beautifully described by the author.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:42)

## Gothic Literature

"It was an offshoot of Romantic literature.

Gothic literature put a spin on the Romantic idea of

nature worship and nature imagery".

(Source: Rebecca Grudzins 2004)



So, how do we seek gothic literature? Gothic literature is an offshoot, is a branch of romantic literature, but then over the course of time, it has come into its own, it has its own body of writing across the globe. So, it has become a kind of an independent domain of literature. But gothic does put a spin on the romantic idea of nature worship and nature imagery as I have been discussing so far.

One of the ways in which you can explore the theme of nature in gothic fiction is to kind of perceive how, comprehend how nature is represented and to what effect. What are the functions of nature that is used in a particular novel? What effect does, say for example,

the representation of nature have on Emily St. Aubert in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. What is the role of nature in *Frankenstein*? What effect does it have on the monster on *Frankenstein* and/or other characters? So these are some of the ways in which you can try to kind of seek the purpose of nature in gothic fiction.

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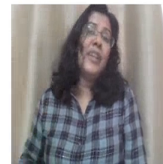
## Indication of Mood

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"The most common feature of Gothic literature is the indication of mood through the weather. When bad things are going to happen in a Gothic novel, the reader knows it because there is inevitably a storm outside".

(Source: Rebecca Grudzina 2004)



Now, mood is also connected to the ambience, the setting, the physical setting as well. So the most common feature of gothic literature is the indication of mood through weather. When bad things are going to happen in a gothic novel, the reader knows it because there is inevitably a storm outside. So, the storm is particularly easy for us to kind of understand the relationship between the external weather and the internal mood of the novel.

So when things are going to take a turn for the worse in a novel, you can see the writer making that kind of foreshadowing transparent by having a storm, a really wild night happen in a particular moment in the novel. So, that kind of connection is something that we have read over the course of literature.

You can think about Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where, when Lear is wandering in the meadows, cut off from the rest of his family, there is a big raging storm outside and he is



caught in the storm. So the internal turbulence of Lear is kind of reflected externally through that wild storm. Likewise, in a gothic novel, when things are going to get ugly, nature itself is wild and turbulent and stormy.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:24)

## The Storm



When Frankenstein is about to encounter his creature in the mountains:

"I quitted my seat and walked on, although the darkness and storm increased every minute and the thunder burst with a terrific crash over my head... vivid flashes of lightning dazzled my eyes, illuminating the lake, making it appear like a vast sheet of fire... I perceived in the gloom a figure which stole from behind a clump of trees near me; I stood fixed, gazing intently... A flash of lightning illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; it's gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity..."

(Source: Rebecca Grudzius 2004) Image source: <http://sites.granderie.ca/raigjet233/2018/04/28/frankenstein-and-the-power-of-nature/>



As we have discussed earlier, the idea of storm is used to kind of set up the appearance of the monster. So when Frankenstein is about the encounter his creature in the mountains, we can see the storm kind of raging and Frankenstein quits his seat. This is a quote from the novel. "I quitted my seat and walked on, although the darkness of the storm increased every minute and thunder burst with a terrific crash over my head, vivid flashes of lightning dazzled my eyes, illuminating the lake, making it appear like a vast sheet of fire. I perceived in the gloom a figure, which stole from behind a clump of trees near me, I stood fixed, gazing intently, a flash of lightning illuminated the object and discovered its shape plainly to me, it's gigantic stature and deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity."

So you can see how the appearance of the creature is connected to the appearance of a monstrous character of nature. So thunder and lightning happens and then, and thunder and lightning is also used to kind of illuminate the nature and character of the monster

and it is gigantic just as nature is kind of boundless and massive, and lightning kind of lightens up the physique of the monster for Frankenstein as well as for us, the readers. And we see it as, we are seeing it with Frankenstein, the monster that he has created. And he says that it is more hideous, it is extremely hideous, it is deformed, and it is unlike the human race. So, what the mood and the dramatic nature of the story is enhanced by this set up of the storm.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:24)

## The De Lacey's



The Creature spends a year living in a hovel adjoined to the De Lacey cottage, from which he watches the family – the blind patriarch, his daughter Agatha, son Felix, and Felix's fiancée, Safie – through a chink in the wall. From the De Lacey's, the Creature learns familial love and, most important, language. Eventually he decides that this loving family and their cottage might be his best opportunity for a sanctuary within the cruel world. One day while Agatha, Felix, and Safie are out, he enters the cottage and introduces himself to the patriarch, begging him for help and friendship. Just as De Lacey concludes "I am blind, and cannot judge of your countenance, but there is something in your words which persuades me that you are sincere," his children return. Felix pulls the Creature from his father's legs and beats him with a stick – all without having heard the Creature utter a word, responding solely to his appearance.'

Source: <http://exhibitions.nptel.org/biblen/outsidere/essays/essayashby>

Image source: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/frankenstein-chapter-7-summary.html>



Now, when we are talking about the idea of nature, we are talking about the idea of the rural life and how ideal life in nature becomes. We also need to focus on the set of characters called the De Lacey's and Frankenstein. So these figures are cottagers and Frankenstein lives for almost a year in a hovel near the De Lacey's and these figures are important because they teach him how to kind of live a life very simply. And Frankenstein looks at this family and kind of envies the love that is there in that family, the compassion and he also tries to help them out very subtly without letting them know for a great part of his life, which he spends with the De Lacey's.

So this set of characters are important because it idealizes the idyllic life. The life spent in simplicity, in close association with nature. So the creature spends a year living in a hovel

joint to the De Lacey cottage and he watches the family and the family has a blind patriarch and he has a daughter Agatha, son Felix, and Felix's fiancé Safie and he kind of watches them through a chink in the wall. From the De laceys the creature learns familial love, love that is found in a family and most important, language. He learns to speak by looking at the speech of these cottagers. Eventually he decides that this loving family and their cottage might be his best opportunity for a sanctuary within the cruel world.

One day while Agatha, Felix and Safie are out, he enters the cottage and introduces himself to the patriarch, begging him for help and friendship. Just as De Lacey concludes, "I am blind and cannot judge of your countenance, but there is something in your words which persuades me that you are sincere" and his children return. Felix pulls the creature from his father's legs and beats him with a stick all without having heard the creature utter a word responding solely to his appearance. So, we have a poignancy in the story.

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## The Cottagers

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'The Cottagers are the means through which the creature learns how to speak(so he can tell his story) and how to "socialize." They are the single most important factor in making the creature long for human company, and then for his feeling of utter despair that drives him to murder'.

(Source: Rebecca Grudzina 2004)



So, the cottagers are the means through which the creature learns how to speak. So he could tell a story and how to socialize, the single most important factor in making the creature long for human company and then his feeling for utter despair that drives him to murder. So, there are extremes of emotion provoked by this particular set of people. On

the one hand, they make Frankenstein long to have a family of his own. They make Frankenstein want to socialize, want to love, but at the same time, when he is rejected from this family, by this family, he becomes utterly full of despair and he wants to kind of wreak vengeance on society.

So, as I said, the cottagers, the worry about the cottagers is an important element of the romantic moment. The cottage becomes idolized in the poetry of Wordsworth. They become people with the best generosity, the most compassion, and they are ideals. But in this novel, you can see a different side to that kind of idealism when he is kicked out by Felix, who is trying to protect his father because he has not heard Frankenstein's creature speak to his father. So he kind of tries to save his father when he sees him kneeling by the side of his father.

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## Frankenstein

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1. Analyze the character development of Victor Frankenstein and the creature;

2. Identify the uses of the other various characters;

3. Compare and contrast Frankenstein to Paradise Lost and other works of literature

(Source: Rebecca Grudina 2004)



Now, there are a few questions that you might want to think about in relation to Frankenstein. The novel, you can analyze the character development of Victor Frankenstein and the creature. You can trace the trajectory of Frankenstein from his childhood to the moment where he chases the monster that he has created.

So you can do a kind of an analysis of all the motivations that drive him to be the man that he is and you can also do a character sketch of the creature and talk about how the creature changes by, through his interactions with society, how he initially longs for Frankenstein's attention and then how he kind of is repelled constantly and then he seeks vengeance. So these are some of the things that you can keep in mind.

You can also think about the use of the other characters. What function do they serve in this novel? You can think about Robert Walton, his silent sister, you can think about Henry, Frankenstein's best friend, Elizabeth and so on, and you can kind of sketch out their function within the novel. You can also compare and contrast Frankenstein, the novel, to Paradise Lost, the work by Milton and other works of literature, perhaps Dracula and other gothic fiction as well. So you can see what or how gothic, this novel is and how different it is to the other works that you find across the period.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:37)

## Frankenstein



- identify and analyze the use of various literary devices such as foreshadowing, suspense, exposition, climax, and foils;
- understand the significance of the subtitle: "The Modern Prometheus;"
- debate the culpability of the two main characters, arguing both sides of the issue

(Source: Rebecca Grudzina 2004)



You can also identify and analyze the various literary devices, such as foreshadowing, suspense, exposition, climax, and foils. Foreshadowing is a very key motif, gothic motif, suspense, and suspense is also a motif of gothic fiction. Then you can see how the exposition is set up. The climax is illustrated for the reader. And foils, Frankenstein is a

foil for Robert Walton, Frankenstein is a foil for the creature himself. So you can see how doubling is used in gothic fiction, how doubles perform and function in the novel. So, that kind of duality is interesting to explore to.

You can understand the significance of the subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*. The *Modern Prometheus* kind of links this novel to the idea of the Promethean legend and how Prometheus the titan stole fire from the gods, and you can connect it to Frankenstein and to Robert Walton. Are they being saviors to humanity? Does their enterprise succeed? If it does not succeed, why does it not succeed? What are the implications of this kind of failures for the rest of society? How does the novel kind of assess the triumphs that are happening in society in relation to science? And why is the novel not trying to appreciate science in this world? So these are some of the questions you might think about.

And you can also finally debate the culpability of the two main characters arguing both sides of the issue. So the two main characters would be Frankenstein, the father and the monster created by Frankenstein. You can argue the righteousness or the evil nature of their actions and see how justified they are in what they have done.

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