



The Uses of Taboo – Queer Gothic and Frankenstein

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was one of the earliest pioneers of Gothic work, and one that still holds strong influence over both Gothic works as well as western pop culture today. Themes from this novel have since become founding tropes of the gothic genre – extreme and turbulent weather, the phrasing of “It was on a dreary night of November,” (reminisce of “it was a dark and stormy night”), even Victor’s propensity for fainting as a damsel would. All of these are extremely present in Gothic and horror media of all kinds even today. One other theme present in *Frankenstein* has also become present in gothic works across the genre today; the pervasive themes of queerness. Gothic literature has been a long-time media for queer writers and queer content, and while this may not be entirely attributed to Mary Shelley, a large portion of this may be a result of her subversive writing in a field that was at the time still very new.

Gothic literature has been attractive to queer writers due to its various themes of the gruesome and unnatural. As a whole, it is a genre that inherently features themes of taboo and rejection from societal norms. The horror of gothic literature is intrinsic to what it is as a genre; it is impossible to use it well *and* appeal to the larger, “normal” audience. It is an unapologetic rejection of normalcy and an equally unapologetic focus towards all things strange and unusual. This is something that has appealed to queer authors for obvious reasons, as LGBTQ people across the board have also been rejected by cisgendered heteronormative and romance-centric society. Gothic literature offers a sense of relatability, of catharsis for the “monster” both narratively and societally. The genre’s embracing of things seen as taboo and gruesome to larger

audiences gives the queer author a space to explore non-traditional dynamics of gender and relationships. Through body horror the idea of what makes a body is explored and deconstructed, as is gender and biological sex. With the various classic monsters that appear in this genre, the idea of being shunned, and the apathy of those surrounding the “othered” monster is explored. Other, less prevalent tropes are also conduits towards an LGBTQ narrative – themes such as disease, isolation, and others.

Frankenstein is one of the founding pieces of gothic literature, and it too is used by Mary Shelley – a queer author herself - to explore fears that many queer people face in daily life, both now and when the novel had been originally written in the 1800s. In the general sense, large features of the genre revolve around the exploration of death, fear, monstrosity, and otherment. The creature in Frankenstein is consistently discriminated against even before turning violent, due to the rest of humanity’s unfounded fears based entirely on his appearance regardless of its actual personality. It is only able to even hold a conversation with a human who is blind, and unable to judge it based on its appearance. (Shelley 89) Even though it is unable to approach the family it watches the creature still decides to avoid taking their resources even though it makes life more challenging for itself. “This trait of kindness moved me sensibly. I had been accustomed, during the night, to steal a part of their store for my own consumption; but when I found that in doing this I inflicted pain on the cottagers, I abstained, and satisfied myself with berries, nuts, and roots, which I gathered from a neighbouring wood.” (Shelley 90) Despite the creature caring for the family’s needs and even assisting them in secret as a “good spirit” might (Shelley 94), it is still rejected by them later after revealing itself, a situation not unlike the discrimination queer people face within the family dynamic.

Frankenstein’s creature itself works as representative of queer identity. It is cobbled together from various parts, none of which are prescribed a specific gender identity, and is a

portent of death and vengeance. The creature itself is a sense of “wrong” in the world it lives in. The mashing together of body parts, which, while described as being “in proportion,” is still gargantuan when compared to the average human’s size. This is a well-known example in pop culture of a type of body horror; a trope which is able to be used by writers as a trans metaphor. This is largely because the trans body is often seen as something horrific by cis standards; something foreign, changed by outside “unnatural” means, often through the use of surgery or hormones. It is seen as a form of trickery or deception as well, and therefore as something “evil.” This narrative of deception and maliciousness is something that can resonate with the transgender experience, as with the creature’s isolation and ignored personage. Despite the ostracization of it by humanity, it is also a creature self-described as reasonable and rational.

““You are in the wrong,” replied the fiend; “and, instead of threatening, I am content to reason with you. I am malicious because I am miserable; am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? You, my creator, would tear me to pieces, and triumph; remember that, and tell me why I should pity man more than he pities me? You would not call it murder, if you could precipitate me into one of those ice-rifts, and destroy my frame, the work of your own hands. Shall I respect man, when he contemns me?”” (Shelley 120). This paragraph is one of the few in which we are able to more closely understand the creature as something that is not inherently monstrous, and is in fact – ironically – something that is more humane in nature. The rage the creature feels comes from the scorn it’s faced, and this exchange shows that it finds its situation unjust, and understandably so. The creature has been pushed aside from humanity – specifically its creator – since the moment it came into existence, for no other reason than that it is perceived by others as something unnatural. The creature describes itself as “miserable,” due to its rejection from humanity and the ways others refuse to consider, let alone accept, it as a rational being. It is the apathy of others which pushes the creature towards violence, and the subsequent isolation of

it that makes the creature believe that its only companionship is with a mate just like itself. One which would be not more like humanity than it, but “just the same”. This can be read as a “T4T” relationship, if one takes into account the transgender coding of the creature’s species. When Victor discards the creature’s mate, however, it leaves himself as the creature’s “companion”. It and Victor revolve around one another; Victor, as its creator, and the creature, as his unwilling creation.

The creature exists as a “violation of nature” – specifically Victor’s violation of nature. This is the reason given for humanity’s treatment of it, despite the creature’s reasonable nature and unwillingness to be viewed as something unhuman. Rejection, as well as being viewed as something “unnatural,” is something common for queer people to experience. The creature can be read as a queer character in multiple ways; it can be seen as transgender, due to its ambiguity of gender and sex, and it can also be read as a gay character. “It is well. I go; but remember, I shall be with you on your wedding-night.” (Shelley 142) His threat towards Victor is something that can easily be read as somewhat romantic and queer in nature. Additionally, Victor also fulfills many of the creature’s desire for a mate; they are alone except for each other, due to the death of Victor’s family, as was the creature’s want for his possible mate. The creature – and in many ways Victor also – reads as both a gay and trans narrative. This is something that was accomplishable due to the nature of the gothic genre; the trope’s heavy use of monstrosity can act as a mirror for the way queer people are and have been cast under the views of oppressive heteronormative society.

The creature’s diversity of possible queer interpretations is itself representative of the various ways the gothic genre can be used to subtly and strongly display various queer attributes through metaphorical language. Mary Shelley, as a pioneer in the early and formative years of gothic works, has had strong influence over a large amount of the tropes and themes seen in the

genre today; some of which are subversively queer in nature. The themes of the unnatural, horrific dynamic between Victor and his creation are intrinsically gothic and queer in a way that is unique to the fear-based nature of gothic literature; as is the freedom it presents to all queer authors, as a genre centered around the focus of societal taboo.

Shelly, Mary, et al. *Frankenstein: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds*
(*the MIT Press*). Annotated, The MIT Press, 2017.