THE GOTHIC, FRANKENSTEIN, AND THE ROMANTICS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss the meanings, types, and sources of the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries English Romantic novel. I discuss how Romanticism and Gothicism run parallel to each other and agree on many points. Then I take Mary Shelley's <u>Frankenstein</u> (1818) as a representative of the Gothic fiction. Afterwards, I attempt to sort out certain Romantic influences, ideas and images present in <u>Frankenstein.</u> I view <u>Frankenstein</u> as a Gothic-Romantic literary piece of work that enjoys a special importance in the history and development of the English novel.

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القوطية وفرانكنستاين والرومانسيون

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ملخص

فى هذا المقال أقدم محاولة لقراءة معاني ومصادر الرواية الرومانتيكية الإنجليزية في القرن الثامن عشر وأوائل القرن التاسع عشر الميلاديين. ثم انتقيت رواية ماري شيلي (فرانكنستاين) المكتوبة عام ١٨١٨ كنموذج للرواية القوطية، وبعدئذ حاولت أن ابين التأثيرات الرومانتيكية على (فرانكنستاين) فأظهرت أفكارا وصورا ومواقف تدل على أن (فرانكنستاين) رواية قوطية ورومانتيكية في آن واحد وأن لها أهمية خاصة في تاريخ تطور الرواية الإنجليزية لأنها جمعت بين خواص ظاهرتين أدبيتين شهيرتين عرفتهما أوروبا في أوائل القرن التاسع عشر الميلادي -- الرومانتيكية و القوطية.

Despite the large number of Gothic novels, novellas, short stories, and sometimes plays that appeared in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England, critics introduced little critical writing about the Gothic literature. It is noticeable that the Gothic novel does not enjoy a good space in the essential books of the history of English literature[1]. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, we notice an appearance of critical writing on the Gothic fiction. Gothic literature wins wider circles of reader-ship; reading Gothic fiction becomes a commonplace habit in Europe, and Mary Shelley is described as "one of the greatest practitioners of the Gothic novel"[2]. Meanwhile, Frankenstein is viewed as a landmark in English literature, signaling the transition from the eighteenth-century Gothic tales, with all their mysteries and ghosts and artificial horrors, to the deeply serious romantic novel of the nineteenth century[3].

The negligence of studying Gothic literature might have been due to a tendency in the histories of English literature to treat the Gothic novel as an unfortunate aberration, a diversion from the main thrust of the development[4].Critics have neglected the Gothic literature until recently.

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(1)   Among the essential books on the history and development of the English novel are, Walter Allen. **The English Novel: A Short Critical History**, 1945; Reprint, London: Penguin Books, 1971, and Ian Watt's **The Rise of the English Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding.** 1987; Reprint, London: The Hogarth Press. 1994.

(2)   Jane Spencer, **The Rise of Woman Novelists: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen.** (1986; Reprint, Oxford and New York: 1989), 182.

(3)   Maurice Cranston, **The Romantic Movement.** (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 65.

(4)   Gilbert Phelps, "Varieties of English Gothic," in **The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, From Blake to Byron**, vol. 5, Ed. Boris Ford (1957; Reprint, London: Penguin Books, 1982), 110.

Hence comes my interest in this topic. I take <u>Frankenstein</u> as a representative of the Gothic novel, then I view <u>Frankenstein</u> as a Gothic-Romantic literary work. The term Gothic is of, or relating to, or having the characteristics of a style of architecture developed in northern France and spreading through western European countries from the middle of 12th century to the early 16th century that is characterized by the use of medieval settings, a murky atmosphere of horror and gloom and macabre, mysteries and violent incident[5].

The Gothic novel is "a kind of novel with sensational and horrifying events, popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries"[6].

The Gothic novel horrifies through the atmosphere of a combination of the barbarous, the supernatural elements, and the locale. The majority of critics and historians of the English novel agree that the term "Gothic novel" conveys three meanings: barbarous (Gothic historical), supernatural (Gothic terror), and fearful mysteries (Gothic horror). The origin of these diversions is Horace Walpole's <u>The Castle of Otranto</u> (1764). The Gothic novel is barbarous like the Gothic tribes of the Middle Ages; medieval castles, knights, chivalry and ghosts. Walpole sets <u>The Castle of Otranto</u> in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and it tells the story of a building destroyed by a horrible ghost. The Gothic novel is supernatural as the supernaturalism of some of the tales of the <u>Arabian Nights</u> [7]. It shares with the Arabian Nights, the elements of

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(5)   This definiton was taken **from Webster's Encyclopedia Unabridged of English Dictionar*y** . New York: Portland House, 1989.

(6)   Earnest A. Barker, **The History of English Novel**, 11 vols. (1942; Reprint, New York: Barnes & Nobles, 1967), 5:175-227.

(7)   In the eighteenth century, **The Arabian Nights Entertainments** was introduced to the Western literature through Antoine Galland's French translation of the original text, **One Thousand and One Nights** in 1704-17.

suspense, and the concurrent question -- in the reader's mind -- what is going to happen next? There is the frightening atmosphere of some tales of the Arabian Nights.   These frightening stories include "Sindbad the Sailor," "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp," "The Tale of the King's Son and the She-Ghoul," and many others. Of the large number of the Gothic novels published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I would like to mention Horace Walpole's Castle of Otranto (1765), Oliver Goldsmith's The Vicar of Wakefield (1766), William Beckford's Vathek (1786), Mrs. Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), and Matthew Lewis's The Monk (1796). Then, it is important to mention the appearance of another English translation of The Arabian Nights. It was made by Jonathan Scott in 1811. It is interesting that the earliest translation of The Arabian Nights and Vathek came to the English literature across translation from the French. Vathek tells the story of the ninth Abbaside Caliph Vathek [Al-Watheq Bi-Allah] in his struggle against Eblis [the Devil] in the palace of jinn. The events occur in a fearful atmosphere in a Gothic palace.

It is conceivable that the three types of the Gothic novel often overlap. The Gothic romantic novel represents one aspect of a new life that comes to the literary arena as a reaction to the neo-classical period; Gothicism runs parallel to Romanti-cism and presents many points of convergence and contact with it. Frankenstein demonstrates many of these points of convergence. Thus, it is a good representat-ive of the Gothic novel in the Romantic Age. Such a representation includes Mary Shelley's relationship and company with major Romantic writers. It also includes her love story with Shelley, and their elopement to the Continent, then their marriage. Furthermore, Mary Shelley is the daughter of William Godwin, the notable social theorist and political thinker, and the author of Political Justice. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, is one of the leading literary figures of her time; she devoted herself to the rights of women in her society. Mary Shelley learns a great deal from her father as well as from her spouse and his circle.

In the Gothic novel , fantasy dominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural with nocturnal intent; to scare"[8]. In her introduction to Frankenstein, Mary Shelley writes that she intended her novel to be "one which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror -- one to make the reader dread to look around, to curdle the blood, and to quicken the beatings of the heart [9].

This is because readers enjoy these sensations. However, Marilyn Gaull sees a reason behind this interest as during that time [1797-1818] English life itself acquired gothic dimensions as the war against France escalated [10].

The Gothic novel is one of the major types of the English novel in the eighteenth century, and there are several kinds of Gothic novels. Both Montigue Summers and Robert Hume prefer to classify these kinds as three. First is the sentimental Gothic, novels of ghost gloomy-castle atmosphere intended to create a kind of sentimental-domestic tales like Clara Reeve's The Old English Baron. Secondly is the terror Gothic that is almost a pure Gothic novel like Mrs. Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho. It is difficult to differentiate between the "terror-Gothic" and the "sentimental-Gothic," but it would scarcely be possible to say which of the two kinds is more popular. Among the "terror-Gothic" are the majority of the novels that owe their inspiration to a German source, even

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(8)   Ellen Mores, "Female Gothic," in **The Endurance of Frankenstein**. Eds. George Levine and U. C. Knoepflmacher (Berkely: University of California Press, 1979), 77.

(9)   Mary Shelley, "Introduction" to **Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus** (New York: Signet Classics, 1983), ix

(10)   Marilyn Gaull, **English Romanticism: The Human Context** (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1988), 240.

if they are not -- as so often proves the case -- direct translations from the German. However, "those two kinds can easily blend in one novel"[11]. Thirdly is the "historical-Gothic" in which the writer uses Gothic atmosphere in historical settings like Sophia Lee's The Recess (1783-85). A lengthy train of writers, most of them women, followed the steps of Miss Lee.

It is curious that women have proved to have more interest in the Gothic novel. On this unique situation Doughty comments to the ladies, these mysteries and horror are dreadful. The thrill of suspense they engendered appealed no less than to the men[12].

Women have proved to be more prolific writers of Gothic stories than men have, specially in the fields of sentimental and historical Gothic. In The Gothic Quest, Summers lists titles and names of eleven sentimental-Gothic novels and their authors, ten of whom are women. In the terror-Gothic, he mentions ten authors: two women, four men, and the rest remain unidentified as they are introd-uced by initials. For the historical-Gothic novel, Summers mentions ten novelists: eight women, one man, and one introduced by initials. This phenomenon of women's interest in writing Gothic novels is worthy of elaborate study[13].

The Gothic movement is mainly a literary movement; it derives inspiration from medieval romantic and some conspicuous images of architectural ruins and archeo-logy. The ancient classics with all the

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(11)   Montague Summers, **The Gothic Quest** (London: The Fortune Press, n. d.), 30.
(12)   Oswald Doughty, "Coleridge : 'The Gothic Novel' or 'Tales of Terror' " in **English Miscellenary** 22 (1971): 126.
(13)   I would like to mention that I noticed that the eight papers on the Gothic literature of the 18th and 19th centuries, presented at The Modern Language Association Convention **(MLA),** Washington, D.C. in 1989, were presented by women researchers and female graduate students from American Universities.

manifestations of the supernaturalism of Homer's the Iliad, Virgil's Aeneid, the Icelandic sagas of the thirteenth century, and Malory's Morte d'Arthur (1485) exerted powerful influences on the Gothic novel. Such influences appear in a variety of their poetic images. They portrayed ghosts, veils, chains, and melancholy situations. Also, the emergence of Gothic fiction coincides roughly with the revival of interest in Elizabethan drama, and some Jacobean drama; some Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists devise Gothic motifs to feed a taste for terror. Moreover, some of Shakespeare's plays provide good examples of the supernatural atmosphere and elements -- ghosts, prophecies, supernatural portents, thunder, lightning, and rain -- that reflect a sense of fear.

Then, the eighteenth century brought about the revival of Spenser and Milton who are, perhaps, the earliest poets to exploit the Gothic mood. This exploitation is apparent in the use of color, music, and smell in the English poetry especially in the graveyard poetry. The fearful elements of the graveyard poetry correspond with the fearful elements and the theme of death in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. The Gothic novel has innumerable branching roots shared by the whole European literature. For instance, the rest of Europe has the image of Germany as the land of supersti-tions and fairy legends: even in earlier German literature there is a fascination for superstitions, dreadful events, and awful aspects.

It is worth mentioning that Kant, Goethe, and other German transcendentalists and Romantics exert influence on the English Romantic writers. Elsewhere, the Italian and French literatures share quite an important part in creating and shaping the Gothic novel in England. The Italian poets, story-tellers, and dark Romantic historians fascinate individual novelists. The French influence on the English novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is unequivocal. In the meantime, it is hard to deny the adaptations from the French drama on the English stage. The culture of the Middle East exerts innumerable influence on the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries English novel. Galland's The Arabian Nights (1704-17) creates a literary atmosphere for a great number of literary work , Such a literary production includes translations, adaptations, and imitations of The Arabian Nights; consider The Turkish Tales (1708), The Persian Tales (1714), and History of Caliph Vathek (1786). These works , influenced by two different cultures of incognate languages and literatures, expressed Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

In 1816, Mary Shelley, staying with Lord Byron, Byron's physician John Polidori, John Clare, and Matthew Lewis at Byron's Villa Diodati near Geneva, listened to Byron read some German ghost stories through French translation and suggest that they should each write one ghost story similar to what he read. Byron's suggestion results in the first vampire story in English literature written by John Polidori; he develops Vampyre from a sketch by Byron. Goethe published a vampire work in 1797. In the light of these events, Mary Shelley writes her Gothic novel Frankenstein (1818), after she listened to a conversation between Shelley and Polidori about Erasmus Darwin's theory of evolution. Shelley is authentic about Mary's idea of writing. Shelley read Frankenstein and offered Mary his suggestions for modifications. Mary gave him a carte blanche to make changes and to improve the events of Frankenstein[14], but the central idea remains Mary's. Consider what one critic, Robert Kiely, writes:

Frankenstein is brilliant, passionate, sensitive, and capable of arousing feelings of profound sympathy in others, yet he is the creator of a monster which causes great suffering and finally destroys his maker[15].

(14)   Alison Milbank, "' I could a story unfold': Women, Romanticism, and the Gothic" in **Romantic Literature From 1790** to 1830. Ed. Geoff Ward (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1993), 47.

(15)   Robert Kiely, "Introduction" to "Frankenstein (1818) By: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (explanation)" in **The Gothic Novel: A Miscellany.** 4 vols., Gen. ed. James Hogg, vol. 2, Thomas Meade Harwell (Salzburg: Universitat Salzburg, 1986), 264.

It is obvious that <u>Frankenstein</u> is the outcome of cooperative effort. Favert comments that   if we ask whom the story of <u>Frankenstein</u> belongs to, we get 'a very general answer' indeed, filled with family relationships, literary links, and overhead conversations. This novel is the offspring of correspondence[16].

Another Romantic scholar, Marilyn Gaull writes that:

Along with her intense personal experience, Mary Godwin brought a great deal of learning, especially in literature, to her novel, reading in classical, Biblical, and Gothic texts, the <u>Arabian Nights</u>, Milton, Rosseau, Goethe, Coleridge, Beckford, Scott, Mrs. Radcliffe, 'Monk' Lewis, Byron, Shelley, and Godwin, her father[17].

This situation leads Kiely to conclude that <u>Frankenstein</u> seems a little book to have been born up under such a mixed and mighty company of sponsors, midwives, and ancestors'[18].

A reading through the Romantic poetry will show identical ideas and images present in Mary Shelley's <u>Frankenstein</u>. For example, death to the Romantics is a release from ugliness as in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which is characterized by social fragmentation, alienation, and loneliness,   all of which intensify and a form of oppression that Keats and his age never escaped, even when they situated themselves knowingly and firmly against political and religious tyranny[20].

One very important possible Romantic way of redemption of all those agonies is to meet death as an escape rather than a redemption or salvation. Mary Shelley's main idea in <u>Frankenstein</u> emerges from the

(16)   Mary A. Favert, "The Letters of Frankenstein" in **Genre**,2 (1987):6.

(17)   Gaull, **English Romanticism**, 240.

(18)   Robert Kiely, **Romantic Novel in England**, 156, quoted in Marilyn Gaull, **English Romanticism**, 240.

(19)   Daniel P. Watkins, **Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination** (New Jeresy: Fairleigh Dickenson University Presses; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989), 106.

(20)   **Ibid**. 105.

"form of depression" of the age, and it bears a broad Romantic feeling and reaction to this oppression.

Mary Shelley portrays the Byronic hero. Frankenstein's monster, like the Byronic hero, suffered depression and alienation. In Childe Harold, Byron feels a sense of isolation, specially after his separation from his wife. That matter forced Byron to leave England. Childe Harold, who is completely, "the child of imagination," becomes more openly Byron's mouthpiece and emphasizes Harold's concept of "self-exile." Frankenstein's monster is a Byronic character. He is "the creature of imagination" who becomes isolated and in a state of "self-exile." In Childe Harold, Cantos CXII, CXIV, Byron introduces with emphasis the idea of depression and alienation that results from some historical moments represented in a sense of nostalgia and depression. In Frankenstein, Frankenstein climbs a rock in a sea of ice, and, all of a sudden, he sees his creature coming towards him with "super-human speed." Frankenstein screams, addressing the monster as a "devil" and a "vile insect." The monster, being rejected even by his creator, feels depression, isolation, and alienation. Thus he answers, "All men hate the wretched; how, then must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things!"

The creature laments that his creator detests him; he recognizes that Frankenstein wishes to destroy him. Frankenstein's monster dislikes the Byronic hero, characterized by "ennui, restless-ness, unrealized potential, and uncertainty of purpose"[21].

In Frankenstein, the creature begs Frankenstein to hear the details of his plight since his creation -- and rejection by society. The ultimate death of the monster releases him, at his eagerness, from his miserable life. Thus, we see how Frankenstein's monster possesses the three

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(21)   William R. Harvey, "Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero," in **Nineteenth-Century Fiction**, 24 (1969): 307.

characteristics of the Byronic hero as classified by Cederic Hentschel --
"the Byronic hero is a tripartite individual: he is the type of the satanic,
sadistic dandy"[22]. The major Romantic writers received Frankenstein
with great respect; on reading Frankenstein, Byron praises its theme
highly. Harry Blamires relates that "Byron confirmed this version of the
origin of Frankenstein, 'a wonderful work,'" and that "James Ballantyne
mentions that Walter Scott has 'greatly preferred Mary Shelley's
Frankenstein to any of his romances' "[23].Dreams and imagination
constitute two major components of the Gothic novel. Both Varma and
Levine have complimentary viewpoints regarding this characteris-tic.
Varma writes.

Dreams do constitute a definite source of the macabre and
undoubtedly they inspired a number of Gothic tales. The Castle of
Otranto was, as Walpole tells us, the result of an architectural nightmare.
Mary Shelley's Frankenstein was likewise born out of a dream[24].

On the episode of the dream, George Levine Comments that the
dream vision out of which the work grows -- Mary Shelley's vision
embodied in that 'dreamy night in November' -- is echoed by Victor
Frankenstein's dream vision within the novel proper, of worms and
shrouds, not of angels and devils. The dream emerges from the complex
experiences that placed the young Mary Shelley, both personally and
intellectually, at a point of crisis in our modern culture[25].

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(22)   Cederic Hentchel, **The Byronic Teuton** (London: Methuen,1940),8.

(23)   Hary Blamires, **The Age of Romantic Literature** (Birute: York Press; Essex:
         Longman Group Ltd., 1989), 20.

(24)   Devendra P. Varma, **The Gothic Flame, Being A History of the Gothic
         Novel in England** (London: Arthuer Barker,Ltd,1957)270.

(25)   George Levine, "The Ambitious Heritage of Frankenstein," in **The Endurance
         of Frankenstein**. Ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepflmacher (Berkely:
         University of California Press, 1979), 4.

It is interesting that there is a close association between dreams--
and their importance for the creative writer -- and drugs at the Romantic
period; Romantic poetry displays dreams; Wordsworth's poem The
Prelude (Book V) presents the reader with a good example. Also, drug-
taking is a common social habit at the Romantic period. Following la
mode of her time and generation Mary Shelley was a drug-taker. Thus, it
is no accident that both [dreams and drugs] and exterior settings in the
Romantic poets often produce unmistakable echoes of the Gothic novels
they consumed [26].

Hennessy adds that much of the contents of Gothic literature was
inspired by dreams, or hallucinat-ory states that were self-induced or
produced by drugs [27].

Dreams have been a source of inspiration for all the Romantic
writers.Dreams, opium eating and prophecies are three main necessities
for the Romantic thinking. Mary Shelley is not unlike the other
Romantics as she employs these Romantic habits in her literary work, and
in various of her novels,Mary Shelley provides a link between Coleridge's
thinking on prophecy, and that of Byron and her poet husband [28].

To explain such a link I would like to say that it is very hard to
separate the Gothic literature of the nineteenth century from the
Romantics as both exerted influences on each other. For instance,
Shelley's Alastor is a good example of a Gothic work. Margaret Homans
realizes that Shelley's Alastor influenced Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.
Homans writes.

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(26)   Joseph A. Wittreich, Jr. "' The Work of Man's Redemption': Prophecy and
        Apocalypse in Romantic Poetry" in **The Age of William Wordsworth:
        Critical Essays on the Romantic Tradition.** Eds. Kenneth R. Johnson and
        Gene W. Ruoff (New York and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 49.
(27)   Hennessy, **The Gothic Novel,** 38.
(28)   **Ibid,** 49.

Just before Frankenstein receives Elizabeth's letter, just after being acquitted of the murder of his friend Clerval, Frankenstein tells us, 'I saw around me nothing but a dense and frightful darkness, penetrated by no light but the glimmer of two eyes that glared upon me. This is a direct allusion to a passage in Alastor[29].

In Coleridge, we see ancient hills and forests and supernatural powers similar to those available in the Gothic novels of the Romantic literature specially Frankenstein. Both Christabel and Frankenstein and many other Romantic works possess what Mackenzie likes to call them "atmosphere of invisible power and terror"[30]. Doughty argues that :

The Ancient Mariner and Christabel were largely inspired by an inferior and popular form of contemporary literature, generally known as 'The Gothic Novel' or 'Tales of Terror' [31].

Christabel also contains elements identical to those Gothic elements of The Castle of Otranto. Christabel manifests the fact that Gothic literature and Romantic literature constitute integral components of the literature of the Romantic era.

Byron's Eastern Tale The Giaour enjoys characteristics identical to those of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Daniel P. Watkins writes.

The Giaour's identity, like the Monster's in Frankenstein, remains unknown. Not only does he move through the story without a name; he never is given a religion, or even a race [32].

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(29)   Margaret Homans, "Being Demons: Frankenstein and the Circumvention of Maternity" in **Romanticism,** edited with introduction by Cynthia Chase (London and New York: Longman, 1993), 168.

(30)   Norman Mackenzie, "'Kubla Khan': A Poem of Creative Agony and Loss," in **English Miscellany** 20 (1969), 231.

(31)   Doughty, "Coleridge: 'The Gothic Novel' or 'Tales of Terror'", **125.**

(32)   Daniel P. Watkins. **Social Relations in Byron's Eastern Tales.** (New Jeresy, Rutherfield: Fairleigh Dickenson Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1987), 48.