



Title of Paper: **Monstrosity in the English Gothic Novel**

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Abstract:

The article “Monstrosity in the English Gothic Novel” examines how the monster in gothic novels gives voice to contemporary fears of society and what sort of fears monsters highlight exactly. To illustrate this claim, different kinds of monsters and monstrosities in the novels *Frankenstein*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and *Dracula* are analysed and compared to each other. The article will furthermore discuss in how far monsters are social constructs and how they are connected to the rise of scientific progress and the decline of religious certitude.

Keywords: Gothic, monstrosity, Frankenstein, Dracula, Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde, monsters

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1. Introduction

The monster in the English Gothic novel can be seen as a representation of social fears and problems. An important aspect of these fears, particularly in the Victorian Period, is the aspect of repressed emotions. These fears can be seen as a result of uncertainty due to the decline of religious certitude, which grew with every new scientific discovery. For ease of understanding, the terms “monster”, “monstrous” and “Gothic novel” will be shortly delineated. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, a monster is “a large, ugly and frightening imaginary creature” or “an inhumanly cruel or wicked person”. Furthermore, the word monster can denote “a thing of extraordinary size” or “a congenitally malformed or mutant animal or plant” (s.v. “Monster”, *Oxford Dictionary of English*). Apart from this, monstrous can refer to someone “inhumanly or outrageously evil or wrong” (s.v. “Monstrous”, *Oxford Dictionary of English*). The Latin origin of the word can also be translated as “a sign” or that which warns or reveals (cf. Cohen 4), hinting at the liminal nature of monsters.

The monster in literature discusses binary oppositions and extremes (cf. Cohen 7). Monstrous bodies represent the strangeness of others and thus help to structure the self and the group the self belongs to. Accordingly, they are used to draw boundaries between the “I” and the “not I”. Furthermore, monsters cross geographical, physical, and psychological barriers and transgress moral norms, making them visible by their excessive deviation. Goetsch states that the monster “dwells at the gates of difference” and polices the border between inside and outside, known and unknown (Goetsch 17-18).

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, the word gothic means “medieval”, or “romantic” as opposed to “classical” and was first used in a pejorative sense (s.v. “Gothic.”, *Oxford Dictionary of English*). The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines the Gothic novel as a story of terror and suspense (s.v. “Gothic Novel.”). In addition, the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* states that Gothic novels challenge neoclassical ideas of unity, coherence, and order. In the 19th century, Gothic fiction responded to anxieties concerning the development of natural sciences “with the introduction of characters like the mad scientist [for example Frankenstein and Dr Jekyll], vampires [like Dracula, and] alter egos and doubles”



(s.v. “Gothic Novel.” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. Furthermore, Gothic novels excite the reader and want to produce emotional effects on the reader (cf. Botting 3). Thus, they are important means of discussing difficult social and political problems. The effects of such novels are that they warn “of dangers of social and moral transgression by presenting them in their darkest and most threatening form” (cf. Botting 7). Common themes are degeneration, bodily deformity (cf. Tibbets 28), the bestial within the human, the doppelgänger and the dangers of scientific progress (cf. Botting 114). These themes are connected to the anxiety of possible atavism.

One type of atavism envisioned in the 19th century was individual moral, mental and physical degeneration (cf. Botting 136-137). The body of a person was thought to be a key indicator of the mental and moral “health” of that person. One perceived threat was that the degenerate would come to outnumber the “healthy” and that therefore the whole society would degenerate, losing its progressive momentum and high state of development, becoming less civilised and ordered. Britain saw itself threatened not only by exterior and but also by interior degeneration (cf. Warwick 150). Gothic novels can be seen as an expression of those fears and perceived threats.

The monsters that will be analysed in this essay are Victor Frankenstein and his creature, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and Count Dracula. Their monstrosity manifests itself in physical as well as psychological and moral degeneration. However, Frankenstein and Dr Jekyll create their own monsters and become monsters themselves in the process, whereas Dracula is a monster a priori.

2. Frankenstein

The novel *Frankenstein* can be classified as a Terror novel. That means that the novel’s focus is on terror and thrill, without actually depicting violent scenes (cf. Guske 29). Terror novels explain the supernatural occurrences they contain on a natural and scientific basis. Although *Frankenstein* was published during the Romantic era, it is an anti-Promethean work in that it criticises Promethean aspirations and is therefore anti-romantic (cf. Goetsch 94). The Promethean aspiration



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in this case is that Victor tries to occupy the role of God or the woman, in “giving birth” to a sentient being.

Both the creature Victor creates and Victor himself can be seen as monsters. Both cross socially established boundaries, albeit mostly different ones. The creature crosses the border between life and death, and humanity and bestiality, while Victor crosses the border between the human and the divine. Moreover, they also cross physical borders by pursuing each other through several different countries, thus spreading the threat they pose. By assembling a creature from dead parts and giving it life, Victor violates the sanctity of human life and death, thereby delineating said sanctity as a norm. The monster’s behaviour represents disregard for human life and callousness, thereby underscoring the respective values.

Degeneration in *Frankenstein* is portrayed both on a moral and a physical level. Frankenstein’s creature appears to be an archetypical monster. He is a large, hideous and frightening creature of extraordinary size. He is superhuman in his heightened intelligence and sensitivity, and in his unusual height and physical superiority (cf. Tibbets 132). Thus, the creature appears to be bestial and an archetypical monster on the outside. Bestiality in the 19th century was conceived as inherently immoral. Therefore, this bestial but intelligent creature threatens society with purposeful immorality. The moral degeneration of the creature, which occurs because he is rejected for his deformity, represents society’s fear of the revenge of the outsider. Victor’s moral degeneration differs insofar as he at first assumes a position he is not fit to handle and then refuses to take responsibility for his actions. This represents the social fear that science could lend divine might to human beings who are not able to handle the accompanying responsibility.

Thus, *Frankenstein* gives voice to the fear of the irresponsible use of science and the difficulties of controlling the outcome. Furthermore, it expresses society’s concern about the violation of its norms and a resulting loss of societal control. Frankenstein’s monster serves as a mirror and projection surface for Victor’s and British society’s fears and that which is perceived as hateful and immoral. Such fears might have been concretely expressed in several ways. For example, criminals, ostracised by society, were possibly fostering a desire for revenge. Additionally, the “bestial but intelligent



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creature” can be seen as a symbol for the “civilisation” of colonized peoples, who were seen on a similar level as beasts. Once “civilised”, these peoples cannot be returned to their savagery and therefore pose a threat to societal order with their “purposeful immorality”.

The ending of the story does not eliminate the threat the creature poses. Although Frankenstein dies, and with him the possibility of creating more monsters, the creature itself is still alive and can still threaten society. This shows that, once created, such threats to society endure and may even destroy their creator, i.e. the British Empire.

3. The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

This novella, as well as *Frankenstein*, is a Terror novel, a term already explained above. Similarly to *Frankenstein*, the reader is confronted with two monsters, Jekyll and Hyde. Accordingly, Stevenson’s work can be seen as a modernisation of *Frankenstein* (cf. Margree and Randall 224), portraying the monstrous as inherent in the human being.

Jekyll’s wish to transfer everything evil in him to another person, namely Hyde, is monstrous because he therewith crosses the psychological boundary between self-control and impulse by renouncing the former. The drug he develops to split his personality threatens contemporary cultural morals and values (cf. Botting 137), because it enables the user to set free purely evil beings with no social inhibitions and no interest in adhering to moral standards. Hyde, in contrast, is monstrous because of his disregard for other human beings and the callousness with which he treats them. Thus, he crosses the border between Christian regard for other human beings and selfishness. This is a parallel to the bestiality of Frankenstein’s creature in that Hyde acts immorally, but is, contrary to the creature, an insider of the society he threatens.

Jekyll’s renunciation of his self-control is a violation of contemporary Victorian ideals of behaviour. As such, he is morally degenerate and, importantly, becomes more so in the course of the novella, acting as though addicted and losing more and more control over his actions. This voices the fear of society that giving in to impulses **even once** leads to a downward spiral. Once someone chooses immorality



over morality there is no redemption. On the other hand, Hyde is physically and morally degenerate. His appearance itself generates a feeling of disgust and unease in other characters, hinting at his evil nature. According to Enfield, Hyde radiates deformity, both on a physical and a moral level. His appearance ties in with his moral degeneration, which corresponds to Lombroso's contemporary theory that criminals can be identified by their outer appearance which reflects their inner deformity. Hyde can be seen as a representation of this theory. Throughout the novella he is characterised as more like an ape than a man. Hyde's bestiality and criminality expresses itself in his immorality and his violence towards innocent and vulnerable bystanders. In addition, the doubling between him and Jekyll is not balanced, since Hyde is completely evil but Jekyll is not completely good (cf. Botting 140). Thus, Stevenson gives voice to the fear of the bestial in human nature and the possibility that this bestiality cannot be controlled and is stronger than the civilised aspect of human nature.

The doubling in the novella furthermore discloses the ambiguity of identity and the instability of the social, moral and scientific cues that are used to manufacture distinctions such as "I" and "the monster" (cf. Botting 141). It also gives voice to the concern that the moral conflict of one person has consequences for the rest of society. This can be seen in the public response to the crimes of Jack the Ripper, two years after the publication of the novella. The fearful outcry generated by the murders underlines the impact an individual moral degeneration has on society and shows the relevance of this fear. Stevenson also voices the concern that the city, the pinnacle of civilisation, might serve as a cover for bestial criminal activities due to its sheer size and anonymity (cf. Goetsch 292). The novella also responds to Darwin's evolutionary theories, which brought humanity closer to animality and therefore undermined the superiority humanity had claimed for itself before such theories were uttered (cf. Botting 12). The degeneracies described in the novella reflect the fear of no longer being distinct from the animal level and the possibility to slowly fall into atavism.

At the end of the novella, Jekyll commits suicide in order to kill Hyde and relieve society of the threat he poses. With Jekyll's and Hyde's death, the knowledge of chemically splitting a person in two dies as well. This shows that the aforementioned



downward spiral, resulting from moral degeneration, can only end in death. On the level of the society, this means that if degenerate activities take hold, society's destruction seems inevitable.

4. Dracula

Dracula can be classified as a Horror Gothic novel. These novels describe violence, brutality und distress. In contrast to Terror novels, the events in the Horror novel tend to have supernatural origins (cf. Guske 29). The novel *Dracula* can be seen as the most significant work of Gothic horror fiction, since it adequately portrays the fears and desires of fin de siècle society.

In the case of *Dracula*, the reader is presented with only one monster, namely Count Dracula. Dracula crosses not only moral and psychological borders, but also physical ones. His voyage to England can be interpreted as an act of reverse colonization (cf. Goetsch 288). He thus violates the sovereignty of the British Empire and reveals its weaknesses. Dracula's crossing between Transylvania and England expresses the fear of an external threat infiltrating the heart of the British Empire. In the novel, Britain is portrayed as being alarmingly open to exterior threats such as Dracula, who insinuates himself into the core of British being (cf. Buzard 450) and corrupting society from within. In addition to the crossing of physical borders, Dracula also crosses the border between the past and the present, and death and living. Through crossing the border between past and present he violates the ideal of progressiveness and hints at the fear of being restricted to the past. Dracula himself is an anachronism. As an undead creature, Dracula also highlights the sanctity of life and death. albeit in a different fashion to Frankenstein's creation.

Moreover, Dracula can be seen as mentally degenerate because of his anachronistic nature. With regard to the importance attached to progressiveness by Victorian society, Dracula represents a force that can pull society back to a more ignorant and atavistic past. His moral degeneracy can be seen in his infliction of his vampiric state upon others, for example Lucy. The figure of the vampire in general can be seen as a personification of evil (cf. Guske 191), epidemic diseases (cf. Botting 148), as well as a personification of sexual lust. Blood drinking is by biblical



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definition evil, whereas causing others to become vampires is analogous to infecting them. The thirst for blood and sexual lust are closely interconnected in the novel, equating sexuality with sin. This voices the Victorian fear of sexuality and the connected loss of control. Furthermore, the connection between sex and blood is linked with the risk of disease in general and sexually transmitted disease in particular.

In addition to his moral degeneration, Dracula is portrayed as physically degenerate. Like Hyde, he is described as resembling an animal more than a human being. Throughout the novel, Dracula is repeatedly referred to as a “thing” or a “monster” and, like an animal, he preys on human beings. The further descriptions of the novel mark him as an outsider, giving him non-British features. Besides, he is described as being supernaturally fast and strong. This degenerate appearance in combination with Dracula’s physical power and other degeneracies voices the fear of the barbaric invader, who subjugates physically and sexually, and imposes degeneracy on others by his brutish force. The unstoppable crossing of the invader evokes an apprehension for the safety of society concerning exterior threats. With the possibility of exterior forces entering Britain, there is also the possibility of such forces encouraging moral decline in the British population. The Victorian readers of *Dracula* were confronted by this fear in different ways. With the losses of colonies in Canada in the past decades and rising economic competition from the United States of America, the novel expresses fears of a potential collapse of the Empire precipitated by a barbarous invasion. On a more abstract level, Dracula may represent sinful foreign values of lust and sexuality insinuating themselves into conservative Victorian society, thereby corrupting English civilisation. Fear of epidemics, both sexually and non-sexually transmitted diseases is reflected in Dracula’s contagious nature. An example for the relevance of this fear is the syphilis epidemic that was rampant in 19th century Europe.

Dracula appears to have a happy ending, where the threat to British society is eliminated and order restored. However, Dracula’s monstrosity seems to be contagious in that he brings out bestiality in those who had contact with him, even those not turned into vampires. The fact that he is killed by hunting knives used for



killing animals serves to underline his status as inhuman. Furthermore, this treatment of his person also suggests the bestiality of his killers, reverting to inhuman means themselves. Thus, the threat he poses to civilised society lingers even after his death. It seems as if everyone who comes into contact with Dracula is rendered monstrous as well. Thus, not only the exterior threat itself is dangerous to British society, but contact with exterior forces threatens to contaminate civilised British citizens (cf. Schmitt 313).

5. Conclusion

According to Botting, Gothic novels can be seen as an attempt to negotiate the anxieties enlightenment, rationalism, industrial revolution and urbanization brought with them (Botting 23). Religious certitude decreased as new theories, like Darwin's theory of evolution, brought humankind closer to animals and bestiality. The theme of monstrosity, related to the unknown and the other, can be used to metaphorically describe human fears. The monster itself is unsettling, because it crosses culturally established borders and thus destabilises them. However, the monstrous body also serves as a means to establish a norm in the first place (cf. Shelton 176), by demonstrating what is abnormal. All three novels emphasise the fact that monsters are social constructs serving the mediation of social fears and anxieties.

Frankenstein is an expression of the fear of consequences of sciences, a resulting violation of social norms and again a resulting loss of control. It also shows how the moral degeneration of only one individual might endanger others. With its themes of the intelligent but immoral beast and the revenge of the outsider, *Frankenstein* epitomizes concrete fears of the consequences of "civilising" other nations, as well as smaller issues, such as the revenge of the ostracised outsider on society and the impact unchecked progress can have on society as a whole.

The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde presents the fears of the duality of human nature and of the bestial within the human being corrupting in turn society from within. It voices the concern that this bestiality might get out of control and threaten society. It thus also reflects insecurities about the potential for immoral behaviour in the civilised city and in seemingly civilised members of society, as well



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as emphasising the addictive nature of giving in to one's impulses and the threat this poses to everyone.

Dracula again portrays the fears of the darker side of human nature and of external threats to society. It also expresses the fear that the degeneration of others might be contagious and undermine British society from within. The concern that the degenerate may outnumber the "fit" is one of the central themes of the Victorian concept of degeneration. The vampire threatens to infect humankind with a permanent "otherness", allowing the darker side of human nature to reside over morality. *Dracula* also resonates with Victorian fears for the crumbling British Empire and the morals of its citizens.

In all three novels, the structure of the narration mirrors the monstrosities it presents. All three novels are fragmented texts. This fragmentation seems to refuse to tell the story from one reliable point of view, mirroring the confusion of what to believe and the possibility of erring fatally. It mirrors the clash of newer scientific theories with older religious perspectives. The letters and journal entries telling different but connected parts of the same story compose a whole whose immensity remains obscure. In contrast, the atrocities in the novels are portrayed with clarity and serve to reassert the values of society, virtue and propriety and to reinforce the value and necessity of social limits (cf. Botting 7). Thus, the monster in the Gothic novel negotiates social anxieties, at the same time reinforcing social limits by delineating them through their transgression.

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