

AQA (B) Literature: 'Elements of the Gothic'

AQA (B) Language and literature: 'Themes in language and literature'

Edexcel Language and literature coursework: 'Gothic and supernatural'

WJEC 'Literary tradition'

OCR 'Texts in time'

Strange but

Bernard O'Keefe looks at the relationship between 'imagination' and 'probability' in four Gothic texts

Gothic novels present things that are terrifying and horrific, things that are dark, frightening and mysterious, things that are transgressive, wild, unnatural, and perverse, and often things that are, if we are honest, completely and utterly unbelievable. And yet many Gothic texts go out of their way to stress the authenticity and truth of what they are describing. This tension between claims of verisimilitude and the presentation of the fantastic can be found in much Gothic fiction, creating in the reader a sense of uncertainty just as unsettling as the more obvious feelings of terror, horror and fear.

In *Dracula*, van Helsing wants the scientist Dr Seward to 'believe in things that you cannot'. To illustrate this he cites an American friend of his who defined faith as 'that which enables us to believe things which we know to be untrue'. The narratives of Gothic fiction often set out to achieve the same effect by using modes of writing and recording associated with the 'real' world — letters, diaries, journals and, in the case of *Dracula*, a range of contemporary means of documentation. In this way the 'unreal' events are embedded in the recognisably everyday, and we are more inclined to believe them.

The narratives, though, are far from straightforward in their methods and structure. Some are fragmentary, some are embedded, framed or hidden, and some are told from multiple and shifting points of view. The result of such methods is a sense of uncertainty, and this sense is heightened by the way that, in their attempts to authenticate and verify tales that are often difficult to believe, Gothic novels often draw attention to their own artifice and to the very act of writing and recording. Gothic texts often blur the boundaries between oppositions — light and

dark, good and evil, conformity and transgression, for example. Their narrative methods have a similar effect, leaving the reader in an unsettling liminal state between what is true and what is imagined.

The Castle of Otranto

This tension between claims to truth and the unbelievable is present in what many regard as the first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's 1764 *The Castle of Otranto*. Walpole initially published the novel with a preface that claimed the novel was a translation of a manuscript found in a library: 'The following work was found in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England. It was printed at Naples, in the black letter, in the year 1529.' The Preface acknowledges the unlikeliness of many of the story's events ('Some apology for it is necessary. Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events, are exploded now even from romances') and accepts that the reader is not 'bound to believe'. Its writer does, though, claim that 'I cannot but believe that the ground-work of the story is founded on truth'.

The novel itself is therefore 'framed' by the larger narrative of the discovery of the manuscript. The action is 'distanced' as Walpole pretends to be the 'translator', merely conveying as accurately as he can someone else's wild imaginings. (In *The Castle of Otranto* such things include an enormous helmet falling on a man and crushing him to death, a bleeding statue, the appearance of a gigantic foot and leg, a ghost walking out of a picture, and an improbably huge sword.) The novel is 'authentic', a genuine translation of a real document; the Preface, with its verifying detail, gives authority to the 'translator'.



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In the Preface to the second edition Walpole adds the explanation 'A Gothic Story' to the title page, admits the pretence of the first Preface and explains his purpose. He wanted to blend imagination and probability:

It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success.

This tension between the improbable and the 'true', the imagined and the real, is reflected in *The Castle of Otranto* in the relationship between the Preface and the story. Subsequent Gothic fiction explores this relationship in more complex and disturbing ways.

Frankenstein

If *The Castle of Otranto* has a simple frame, the framing in *Frankenstein* and the relationship between truth and fiction is much more complicated. The use of multiple narrators, shifting points of view, together with moments when we are made aware of, and perhaps question, the very act of recording and storytelling, create a greater sense of unease and a more unsettling questioning of 'truth'.

In *Frankenstein* the whole narrative is 'framed' by letters from Robert Walton to his sister, Mrs Saville. Before we get to Chapter 1 of the narrative we have four letters that stand 'outside' the

novel. Walton describes in his fourth letter taking Frankenstein on board and listening to his 'history'. Chapter 1 begins that history, delivered in the first person by Frankenstein himself. But the story is not coming to us directly — it is being dictated to Robert Walton: 'I have resolved...to record, as nearly as possible in his own words, what he has related during the day. If I should be engaged, I will at least make notes' (my emphasis). We are immediately made aware of the act of recording, the act of writing, and of the way Frankenstein's story is being mediated through Walton. As we read his narrative we are occasionally reminded of this audience: 'I see by your eagerness and the wonder and hope which your eyes express'; 'your looks remind me to proceed'.

The monster's tale is contained within Frankenstein's narrative. Told to Frankenstein who tells it to Walton who writes it up and sends it in a letter to his sister, the monster's story, at the heart of the novel, is embedded, hidden, distanced. Just as in other Gothic texts, narratives are literally 'hidden' (the best example in *Frankenstein* is the monster's convenient discovery of Frankenstein's journal in the pocket of a dress taken from his laboratory), so is the monster's tale a discovery of the darkness that lies beneath, the nightmarish terrors that lurk below the surface of the civilised world.

Throughout *Frankenstein* we are reminded of the method of storytelling, the act of writing and recording and the importance of audience. All these call into question the *reliability* of the narrative, as well as the consistency of *voice*. The series of

first-person narratives (which overlap chronologically) are all presented by Walton who sends them to his sister: 'You have read this strange and terrific story, Margaret'. In doing so he is keen to stress their truthfulness, pointing out that Frankenstein himself has been involved in the editorial process, asking to see Walton's notes, 'correcting' and 'augmenting' them; 'Since you have preserved my narration,' said he, 'I would not that a mutilated one should go down to posterity.'

Jekyll and Hyde

In *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* the 'truth' of the narrative is delayed until the end — the story is in many senses told in reverse. Just as there are hidden, framed and embedded narratives in *Frankenstein*, so in *Jekyll and Hyde* is the truth hidden, both literally and metaphorically. Roger Luckhurst comments that 'The narrative moves from the outer edges of the secret to its final revelation. It unfolds like a sequence of Russian dolls nested inside each other.' Throughout the novel there are repeated references to 'sealing' or 'enclosure'. These terms are applied to various forms of writing, most often to letters, and it is the opening of two sealed letters which leads to the revelation of the dark hidden mystery. 'The two narratives in which this mystery was now to be explained' are contained in two sealed envelopes opened and read by the lawyer and the reader simultaneously.

One is 'Doctor Lanyon's Narrative', and the other is 'Henry Jekyll's statement of the case'. Here the unbelievable story of Jekyll and Hyde is revealed. It is all highly improbable and the scientific explanation is certainly thin. The unbelievable and unimaginable, though, is hidden in the world of the real and believable. The dark truth of Jekyll and Hyde has been hidden, literally, in a sealed envelope, but also metaphorically, as the frightening, horrific and unmentionable lurking below the civilised surface of Victorian England. As Luckhurst comments: 'The point of these nested stories is to situate Jekyll's final impossible revelation in the world of the possible, a trick of embedding the supernatural in the everyday.'

Dracula

The narrative method in *Dracula* is even more complex, its effects even more unsettling. As in *Frankenstein* there is no omniscient narrator, but the narrative here is much more fragmented. Its multiple narrative perspectives are presented through a range of methods of writing and representation — letters, telegrams, newspaper reports, translations, business letters, medical case histories, transcriptions of shorthand notes and of wax-cylinder phonographic recordings. This encourages a sense of authenticity, the fantastic and supernatural events being recorded in documentary authenticity, 'embedded' in everyday, and contemporary, means of recording. The text, though, undermines its own claims to truth. The act of writing, recording and transcribing, as well as the act of reading and decoding, is emphasised throughout the text in such a way that we are encouraged to doubt the truth of what we are reading.

The novel is preceded by an opening note:

How these papers have been placed in sequence will be made manifest in the reading of them. All needless matters have been eliminated so that a history almost at variance with the possibilities of later-day belief may stand forth as simple fact.

This note, which expresses the same tension as Walpole's first Preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, the same concern to make the unbelievable believable, is unattributed, but it seems most likely to be the work of Mina, arch-editor and arranger.

At the end of the novel, though, such claims to authenticity seem to be undermined by Jonathan Harker's final note:

I took the papers from the safe where they have been ever since our return so long ago. We were struck with the fact, that in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document; nothing but a mass of type-writing, except the later notebooks of Mina and Seward and myself, and Van Helsing's memorandum. We could hardly ask anyone, even did we wish to, to accept these as proofs of so wild a story.



Kenneth Branagh in *Frankenstein*

Throughout the novel the reader sits uneasily on the threshold between these two oppositions. On the one hand we are reminded throughout of the veracity of what we are reading: Dr Seward in his diary says 'Let it all be put down exactly', Lucy Westenra writes '*This is an exact record* of what took place tonight' (my emphasis), Van Helsing says to Mina 'I have read your husband's so wonderful diary. You may sleep without doubt. Strange and terrible as it is, it is *true!*', and Jonathan Harker writes that 'this very script may be evidence to come between some of us and a rope'. Yet, on the other hand there are many moments when we doubt the veracity of what is recorded. Mina, for example, records the words of the old man in Whitby in great detail while confessing 'I did not quite understand his dialect'. When she says that there is 'something about the shorthand symbols that makes it different from writing', she encourages us to question its status and when she confesses 'I am anxious and it soothes me to express myself here', she makes us think that there may be motives other than objective

accuracy involved in the act of writing, something which Jonathan Harker echoes when he writes 'As I must do something or go mad, I write this diary'.

As in other Gothic texts Dracula has several narratives that are literally 'hidden' — the roll of paper inside the dead seaman's bottle, Mina's sealing of Jonathan Harker's notebook, Lucy hiding 'this paper in my breast, where they shall find it when they come to lay me out', for example. Just as significant, though, are texts being recovered, destroyed, repaired, fragmented and unified.

Horace Walpole in his 'Gothic Story' attempts to blend imagination and probability. Other writers of Gothic narratives do the same, placing the reader in that liminal state between our real world and the world of imagined fears and horrors. They also, through their narrative methods, provide an unsettling fragmentation of perspective, an unnerving sense of dark truths hidden below, or embedded in, our everyday lives, and, through a self-consciousness in the act of recording and representation, a disturbing sense of textual instability. We may not believe in vampires, monsters, and Jekyll-Hyde transformations, but the way Gothic texts are written makes us not quite certain that they do not, or could not, exist.

Further reading

Stevenson, R. L. (2006) *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales*, R. Lockhurst (ed.), Oxford World's Classics. (See the Introduction.)

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- Bond, C. (2009) '*Frankenstein*: is it really about the dangers of science?', Vol. 20, No. 1
- Bunten, P. (2010) 'Capturing the castle: the Gothic castle as myth, motif and metaphor', Vol. 20, No. 3
- Frost, R. (2002) 'Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the Victorian woman', Vol. 13, No. 1
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- McBratney, L. (2010) Q&A: '*Tom Jones* and *Dracula*', Vol. 21, No. 1
- McCulloch, A. (2002) 'Revolting monsters: The importance of education in *Frankenstein*', Vol. 13, No. 2
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