

Elements of the Gothic

Rob's essay was written for Section B of the AQA (B) English literature A-level Unit 3, 'Elements of the Gothic'. It was written without the texts, under timed conditions (one hour) a few weeks before the exam. In this section candidates have to write about three texts in relation to an aspect of the Gothic

Gothic: AQA (B) Literature; Edexcel Language and literature; OCR Literature; WJEC

The White Devil: AQA (B) Literature; Edexcel Literature; OCR Literature

Dracula: AQA (B) Literature; Edexcel Language and literature

Frankenstein: AQA (A) Literature; AQA (B) Literature and Language and literature; OCR Literature; WJEC

Ray Fearon as Brachiano in *The White Devil* (RSC 1996)

The question

Consider the view that literature in the Gothic genre is always shocking.

Rob's answer

In *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* the plots are driven by a centuries-old, bloodsucking, shape-shifting aristocrat with super-strength and control of wind and weather and an eight-foot creature comprised of the parts of other dead people, yet alive. To this extent, both are shocking to the reader, as it is unexpected and outside the realms of what we know. This is less so the case for a modern reader, familiar with the characters, but would have a great impact on the contemporary readers. Though not quite as supernatural, *The White Devil* is shocking by virtue of how the characters act throughout the play; an audience with a sense of morality should find it shocking. However, to suggest that the key point of these texts is simply to shock would be an oversimplification.

Rob gets off to a brisk, confident start. He makes clear which three texts he is discussing and focuses clearly on the terms of the question, even, in his final sentence, challenging it. These are all very sound tactics.

His lively description of the shocking elements of the first two texts shows clear engagement and response, and although his points about readers and audience could be more specific they are showing an awareness of context. His definition of 'shocking', though, is quite narrow — in linking it to the unknown he leaves out the important elements of fear, terror and horror, all important features of the genre. One good thing about this opening is that it avoids the common mistake in essays of this type of beginning with a range of generalisations about the Gothic. He is focused on the texts and on the question — exactly the right approach.

Bela Lugosi as the Count in the 1931 film version of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*



The White Devil has a plethora of shocking moments throughout, many transgressing the boundaries of what is considered normal and acceptable. Lodovico's flippant response to the murders he committed ('las they were flea-bitings') not only reveals a blasé approach to murder, but is also shocking as it sets the play in a world where such violence is accepted and lightly punished — 'banished' as opposed to executed.

Brachiano's desire for another woman (Vittoria) is not in itself shocking — no doubt many men have felt a similar desire — yet his means of disposing of his current wife (Isabella) would shock even the most callous. He poisons a picture of himself that she keeps by her bed, in the knowledge that she will kiss it and get poisoned — which she does. This act of murder is made more shocking by the fact she dies in an act of love and reverence for the husband who killed her and further exacerbated by Brachiano's response; 'Excellent, then she's dead'.

The use of Flamineo as a pander is deplorable, yet not shocking until one considers that he is pandering his sister, and only for the sake of his own self-promotion. This unpleasant triangle of a murderous Duke, possibly incestuous malcontent and a duplicitous high-class prostitute transgresses all social norms

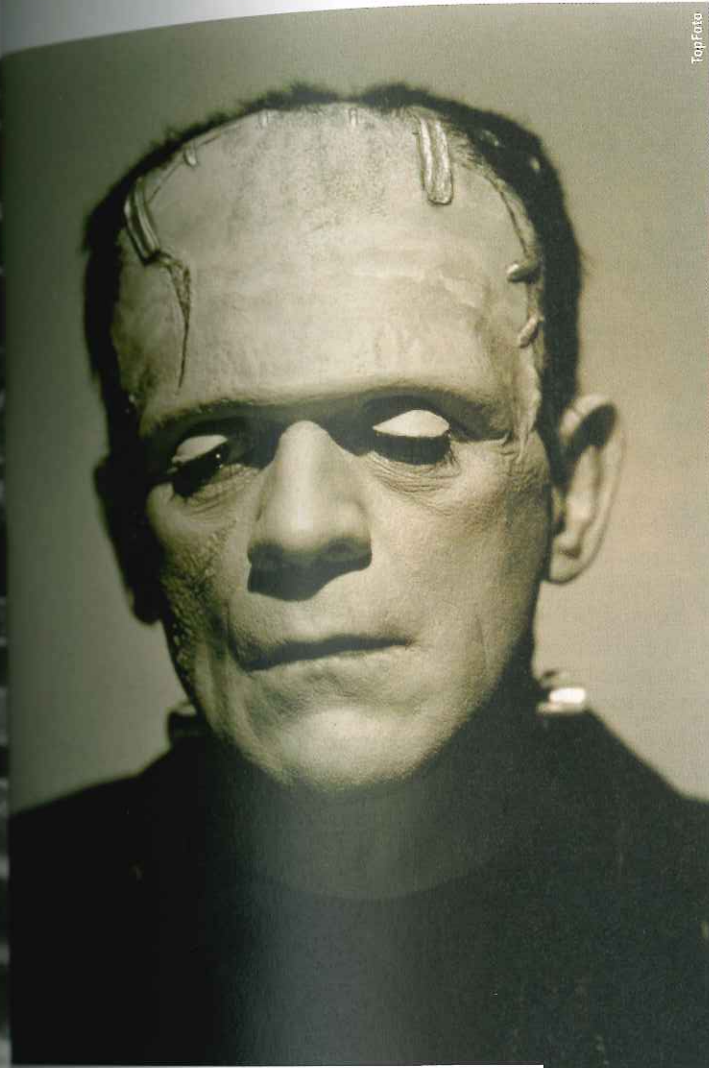
and would be shocking to an audience. Furthermore, these actions draw attention to the potential for corruption in the court, even among those highest placed.

In addition the portrayal of the church in *The White Devil* is shocking as even the Pope (Francisco) is portrayed as evil, ironically owning a 'black book' of murderers rather than carrying round a Bible. Indeed the revengers out to get Brachiano disguise themselves as 'capuchin monks' even using religion as a front for vengeful acts, a shocking inversion of the norm.

Flamineo is undoubtedly the most shocking character, telling Cornelia he would rather his mother was the 'commonest courtesan in Rome', murdering his brother in front of Cornelia and strangling Camillo, a harmless fool. Much of what Flamineo does makes *The White Devil* a shocking play, and the use of a mysterious and supernatural dumb show to reveal Isabella's and Camillo's murders as well as two appearances of ghosts (Brachiano's and Isabella's) reinforce this.

Rob opens his essay with four paragraphs on John Webster's *The White Devil*. He gives detailed examples of what is 'shocking' in the play but he comes close at times to doing little other than listing or relating them. He shows a good grasp of the text, and all that he writes is relevant, but he could perhaps say more

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Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's monster (1935)

about the 'shocking' sexual behaviour and the 'shocking' corruption in both church and court. More significantly, he could give more telling supporting quotation and more analysis of exactly how and why these things shock the audience. If he were to consider the nature, function, effects and significance of the 'shocking' elements of the play — its presentation of transgressive sexual and psychological behaviour, its presentation of excessive violence and gruesome deaths, its supernatural elements — he would have got closer to the heart of its 'Gothic' nature. He could, for example, have developed ideas about the shocking nature of the voyeuristic and possibly incestuous desires revealed in Flamineo's relationship with his sister, the sense of physical horror felt witnessing the extended poisoning of Brachiano, the suddenness of many characters' unexplained actions, and Flamineo's 'fake' death.

Dracula acknowledges at the beginning how shocking it is, with a note trying to give it credibility, the point being 'this is so shocking you probably won't believe it'. However, unlike *The White Devil*, much of *Dracula* is not shocking, rather focusing on character development, and introducing other themes. Nonetheless, certain moments do agree with the statement.

Rob's opening paragraph on *Dracula* could be stronger. It is, at times, too casually expressed — the phrase 'this is so shocking you

probably won't believe it' could be expressed more formally and without recourse to quotation marks — and Rob seems unclear about whether the novel is, in fact, 'shocking'. He seems sidetracked by the prefatory note which is more about 'believability' and 'truth' than it is about the shocking nature of what is to follow.

Jonathan Harker's encounter with the three female vampires is shocking, as it is so offensive to Victorian sensibilities. Harker desires that they will 'kiss me with those red lips' showing his desire for multiple partners who are not his wife, while he is also the submissive party, 'lying motionless' and 'paralysed with fear and ecstasy', an inversion of the norm where the man would be in control. Similarly, Lucy's 'Bloofer Lady' attacks include killing children, a shocking inversion of the maternal norm.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of *Dracula* is the existence of the Count himself, defying all logic and reason in a scientific age that thought it knew everything. The fact he drinks blood to survive, as well as controlling weather and animals, makes his existence shocking and disturbing to the reader. The failure of science, juxtaposed with the success of superstition and religion in dealing with *Dracula* could also be considered shocking, as could Seward's inability to diagnose or improve Renfield who is partially inexplicable, and therefore shocking, throughout.

Rob is still showing a good grasp of textual detail and is still keeping a focus on the question, but he is still mainly listing the 'shocking' elements of the novel. He is also confusing the inexplicable with the shocking. He could perhaps talk about the way the novel makes the reader experience both 'terror' and 'horror', two key Gothic ideas both to do with fear and shock.

However, large chunks of the narrative do not focus on the shocking, gory or transgressive, so while the statement 'literature in the Gothic genre is always shocking' may be true, that is not to say it is *only* shocking, and *Frankenstein* further illustrates this.

Rob here takes on the terms of the question (something which candidates are encouraged to do) but he fails to develop the point, by briefly mentioning the other aspects of the novel that do not shock. He makes an easy link with the third text. Explicit comparison is not required in this essay (the idea is that you connect the texts through consideration of one aspect of the genre) but it is always a good idea to show some sense of connection as you move from one text to another.

The supernatural existence of the monster is, of course, shocking, as it defies the boundaries of life and death and the natural reproductive process. Similarly the monster's murder of William, framing of Justine, and relentless pursuit of his creator, could all be called shocking as could Frankenstein's destruction of the female he was making for the monster.

However, the most shocking moments for the reader should not be the violent murders and transgressive use of science, but rather the treatment of the monster by other people. He is rejected, derided, called names ('filthy daemon', 'monster', 'devil') purely based on appearance — not a fair judgement, but a damning indictment of mankind. While the characters in the book find the monster shocking, the reader should find the way the characters treat the monster shocking.

The novel is also full of narrative about sublime landscapes, delving into human psychology and exploring relationships between people, suggesting it is not solely preoccupied with being shocking.

In his consideration of *Frankenstein*, as with the other texts, Rob keeps a focus on what is 'shocking' and gives a good range of relevant points, moving beyond the obvious moments of physical shock and horror. He again tries to take on the terms of the question, but, as with *Dracula*, he needs to do so more convincingly.

Within these three texts, there is enough evidence to suggest that literature that may be classified as within the Gothic genre is always shocking, although there is also enough to suggest that they are more than just shocking and deserve more than simply to be classified as 'horror stories'.

Rob's conclusion is sound, though he has not fully developed the argument he claims to be concluding, namely that, though literature in the Gothic genre may always be 'shocking' there is much more to it than that. What is good about Rob's essay is the way it attempts to grapple with the question and the way it tries to keep a relevant focus throughout. It would benefit from more relevant quotation and its vague statements about contemporary audiences and readers could be developed into more substantial contextual points.

The areas in the mark scheme that Rob addresses include:

- discussion of some of the shocking elements within the texts studied
- response to the word 'always' in the question, modifying it and arguing cogently

- well-argued personal response
- engagement with the Gothic transgression of sexual and/or religious and/or moral boundaries

Areas that Rob does not address or could address more fully include:

- engagement in contextual considerations, particularly reception contexts
- interpretation of 'shocking' in a more modern colloquial sense (in other words, bad/awful) and argument that the contents and/or the language and structure of the texts may be 'shocking' in this sense

Rob's answer is good. It avoids the common mistake of beginning with a potted history of the development of the Gothic genre, it avoids the unloading of irrelevant background information and it shows a direct initial engagement with the question.

The key elements in this kind of essay are:

- relevant opening
- embedded quotation
- integrated context
- debate
- question focus
- close textual exploration
- structured argument
- evaluation

Rob's essay has many of these elements. It is clearly written, is focused on the question, and has a structured argument. It could have more integrated contextual points, more embedded quotation and more close textual exploration but, as a timed essay under exam conditions, it has many strengths. Rob went on to gain an A* in his A-level.

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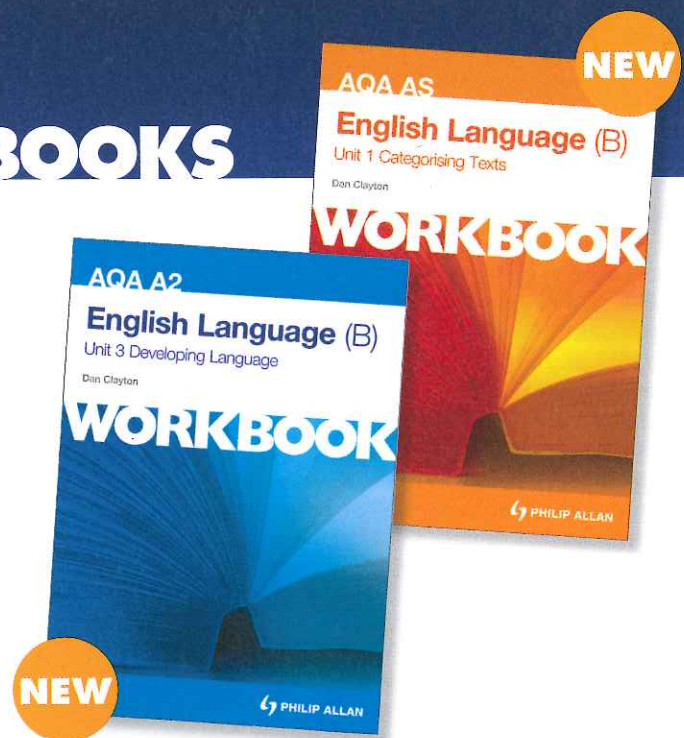
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