**Society, Culture, And The Gothic - Introduction.**

**Context – AO4**

* In the mid-1800s, women had few rights and were expected to be subservient to men.
* Not only were women denied the vote, they were denied the right to own property.
* Cultural expectations required that women refrain from expressing themselves openly in the presence of men.
* Rather they were expected to be pure, pleasant, and supportive of men at all times.
* But, as reflected by the controversial Gothic novels, these rigid roles were changing.

**Interpretations – AO3**

Feminist critics point out the unusual prevalence of strong female characters in Gothic novels, and the way their independent and often sexual behavior was harshly criticized by contemporaries of the novels.

Modern critics also point out the way in which female sexuality was often used to denote strength, rebelliousness, and evil.

Appearing as nefarious seductresses, female characters were often demons or villains who were punished or made to see the error of their ways at the story's end.

Feminist critics also claim that while women in earlier novels had been portrayed as victims waiting to be rescued, in Gothic novels the roles were often reversed and the male characters were victimized.

Other scholars see the validation of marriage as a common theme of Gothic novels and still others argue that the genre allowed women readers of the mid-1800s to enjoy independence vicariously through the actions of the female characters.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) has received particular attention from feminist critics, as the novel offers common themes in the female Gothic tradition: fear and anxiety surrounding the birth process, female sexuality, and women's bodies.

Modern women authors employ horror and the Gothic to convey the horror of being perceived as freakish by society for engaging in and espousing artistic and vocational pursuits considered outside of the traditional—and, thus, approved—women's realm, or for choosing to delay or avoid pregnancy, marriage, or motherhood.

These narratives relate the unique and deeply rooted fear and anxiety experienced by women who are afraid simultaneously of being trapped in stifling, repressive roles and of being rejected or isolated for challenging these prescribed roles.