

Modern Gothic narratives: A revolution of romantic proportions

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ABSTRACT: This paper is based on a unit developed for senior English students. Students were challenged to draw connections between traditional Gothic texts and popular Gothic visual and written texts, using Romanticism as a springboard, through a series of carefully orchestrated exercises and tasks. Students read and discussed Frankenstein, Dracula, The Shining, film excerpts (The Sixth Sense, The Shining, Bladerunner, The Lost Boys among others) newspaper articles, poetry and philosophy to find the threads that connect.

KEYWORDS: Gothic, horror, romanticism, intertextuality, new historicism, popular, culture, the canon, Frankenstein, Dracula, science fiction, vampire.

INTRODUCTION

Like many English teachers across the state, in fact across the country, I am faced with a challenge. My challenge is to create a classroom which stimulates my students while steering them safely to secure achievements. I want to give them a range of experiences while drawing on what they already know. I have firm beliefs about intertextuality. I love popular culture but I also believe that there is a place for teaching texts that might be regarded as the canon.

This thinking was the basis of my recently developed unit on the Gothic with its focus on historical research and it was confirmed by an article by Brian Moon in which he advocated the place of research in the English classroom using *X Files* as the starting point. His aim was not to see the text as an object in history but to “identify the raw materials from which the text has been assembled” (Moon, 2001). He advocates the use of research in English as an addition to the “narrow set of reading practices assembled around the figure of the critically reflective reader.” This view reminds us that English has become a wider field of study than it used to be and it encompasses an extensive range of theories and practices. To fail to draw on this understanding produces very narrow-minded students who believe that their own personal views have an exalted status and who wonder what happened to the English they knew when they enter university. Taking a cultural studies approach to English, and engaging with contemporary texts on an historical and intertextual level, leads to responses which reveal greater awareness of social, historical, political and cultural influences on our modern world.

Many theories about English form the underpinning of this unit which is eclectic in practice. Part of the framework is derived from New Historicism, an approach which avoids totalisation but encourages research into the context of a work by looking at literary and non-literary texts. Intertextuality is yet another theory which serves to break down the barriers between texts. What the unit avoids doing is applying the notion of universal truth to any text while suggesting instead that each text operates in

its own time and context. Ideas are not part of a continuum but are influenced by the context in which they are created.

The unit that I devised also took into account boys' learning needs as it was presented to a male audience. Boys favour knowledge and non-fiction texts but they also like the violence of Gothic texts. As well as this I tapped into boys' love of self-directed tasks using the internet. All of these factors are evident in the design of the unit.

STRUCTURE OF THE UNIT

Romantic poetry had been previously taught so students had a knowledge of the Romantic period and its philosophy. Students were given a 30page booklet with background information from many sources about the notion of Gothic, and essays and exercises that I wrote for the students to use. The booklet included an extensive bibliography and lists of probable tasks, allowing the students scope to develop their own area of study. The booklet proved invaluable when students were conducting their own research.

ASSESSMENT

Task One: Visual literacy – students were to view a five minute segment of a modern Gothic film and write an essay on how the director had created a sense of horror. The breakdown of the visual literacy into a close study of one section of film allowed students to hone their skills for later extended tasks. The creation sequence in *Frankenstein* (Kenneth Branagh version) or a scene from *The Sixth Sense* was used.

Task Two: A researched extended piece of writing based on a novel. There was a choice of tasks or students could devise their own topic. Texts included: *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Shining*, *Into the Dark*.

Task Three: An extended oral: A multimedia presentation bringing together visual and written sources and creating a strong argument. One of the requirements was to learn to limit the visual offerings and to select only the most important sections. Students also had to develop strong cohesion when moving from visual to written. Analysis rather than description was the aim. Despite constant reminders, timing was a problem with overly enthusiastic students.

Student topics for essays and orals included: *Sexuality in Dracula and Other Vampire Texts* (the boys loved doing this!), *The Adaptation of the Promethean Myth from Frankenstein to Bladerunner*, *Computer Games and the Gothic* (an excellent multimedia presentation), *The Transformation of Frankenstein into Jurassic Park*, *Modern Gothic Films and Madness*, *Edgar Allen Poe and Stephen King*, *Landscapes of the Gothic*, *Blood and the Gothic*, *Vampires: An Evolution from Bram Stoker to Ann Rice*, *Childhood Rejection and the Creation of Monsters*.

Not all the final essays captured the potential of the titles but the boys enjoyed the unit and the assessment.

UNIT INTRODUCTION

In this discussion I don't want to revisit the old argument about the place of popular culture in teaching; instead I want to disentangle what we now identify as the Gothic and to show the relationship of modern texts to past texts while also demonstrating that in Gothic texts we find a reflection of the fears of the contemporary culture.

In the vast resources available, seemingly disparate texts such as *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *Jane Eyre* which the modern audience would distinguish as science fiction, horror and romance respectively, are linked as being Gothic. Too many definitions of the Gothic, however, focus on the superficial level of setting and fail to offer a convincing statement about the genre. *Jane Eyre* can on the surface be seen to be a direct descendant of the melodramatic Gothic novels of the eighteenth century, especially the work of Mrs Radcliffe, and yet the influence of *Frankenstein* is also present (Renfro, n.d.). *Frankenstein* marks a departure from the melodrama and the rational conclusions of Radcliffe while developing the sense of horror at man's condition. *Dracula*, in contrast, goes back to the horror of Walpole and Monk, Gothic writers who dwelt on the supernatural. All the texts are concerned with man's condition and the fear that is experienced when man cannot control his environment. It is this psychology of fear more than anything else which links the texts and this fear is a result of evil. In some texts virtue triumphs over evil, while, according to the Britannica, "in others the evil is so monumental that everything good in its path is destroyed and then it destroys itself".

The evil in *Frankenstein* is more subtle than what a modern audience would recognise as evil and is concerned with man acting as God. In the novel, Mary Shelley established a new strand of the Gothic, different from the romances set in castles in which lurked a secret that caused fear. Unlike many of her Gothic antecedents, she failed to offer a satisfactory conclusion but left the reader with the realisation of the horror of the actions of Frankenstein. While doing this, she still maintained some of the outward trappings of the Gothic in the use of the landscape and the castle settings. Inspired by the Rhine valley scenery, she managed to blend the sublime nature of the landscape with the sense of entrapment at the horror of the situation. The monster is a real person, crafted by another, in an attempt to find the secret of life. Science provided the knowledge, which reenacts the Promethean myth, highlighted in the subheading *The Modern Prometheus*. Just like Prometheus, Frankenstein sought knowledge and stole "fire" from the Gods. Both were punished for their actions. The direct defiance of the Gods was the evil.

The book draws significantly on Romantic ideas about the sublime and creativity. Its very inception in a dream echoes the Romantic notion of the power of the imagination when in repose, and the ideas in Goya's engraving *The Sleep of Reason*, with its subtitle "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters". It is also connected to Percy Shelley's play *Prometheus Unbound*, to which Mary Shelley wrote an introduction, and to Byron's play *Manfred* where he writes in Act 1 scene 1:

*The tree of knowledge is not that of life.
Philosophy and science, and the springs
Of wonder and the wisdom of the world
I have essayed, and in my mind there is*

*A power to make these subject to itself,
But they avail not.*

The Romantic notion of a power beyond science which can overcome man's search for knowledge is still present in modern interpretations of the Promethean myth. This attitude prevails in recent visual and written texts about science. In *Jurassic Park* and *Bladerunner*, for example, science has the power to change the world and yet in all these scenarios science fails because it acts against our sense of humanity.

The aim of the scientists in *Jurassic Park* is to recreate the world of dinosaurs to gain insights into the past. The result is a theme park dedicated to dinosaurs. Unfortunately the end result is death and devastation. Just as Frankenstein's family become the victims of the monster's revenge at being deserted, so does the scientist's family in *Jurassic Park*. There is no place to escape as the wrath of God is let loose: nature becomes a malevolent force seeking retribution.

A further reinterpretation of *Frankenstein* emerges in the film *Bladerunner* (Clayton, 1996). Bladerunner is the name given to the special police assigned to eliminate the last androids, replicants, on earth. The replicant is "virtually identical to human ... superior in strength and agility and at least equal in intelligence" with a perfect body, superhuman strength and heat resistance. As in *Frankenstein*, one of the rebel replicants seeks out his creator to alter his state. The sequence of his creator's death is reminiscent of *Frankenstein*. When the replicant speaks of his love of the world, "I've seen things you people would not believe... all those moments will be lost in time like tears in the ocean" he is revealing the same sensitivity as Frankenstein's monster in his eloquent and impassioned speech to Frankenstein, where he declares "But my chief delights were the sight of the flowers, the birds, and all the gay apparel of summer". After killing his maker the replicant sheds tears, just as Frankenstein's monster howls in the cold of the Arctic at his "father's" death. Frankenstein's monster continues his travels to the North Pole, the same destination as the remaining female replicant who asks her lover, Bladerunner: "What if I go north, disappear, would you go after me?"

All of the horror which is unleashed upon the world of Frankenstein and Bladerunner can be justified by the rejection suffered in childhood. Frankenstein's maker deserts him when he is faced with the enormity of his actions. The replicant feels a sense of rejection upon returning to his maker who calls him "the prodigal son" and refuses to help him extend his life, asking "Can the maker repair what he makes?" Frankenstein similarly refuses to help his monster, who asks for a mate so that he can "excite the sympathy of some existing thing."

The importance of nurture or lack thereof in creating deviant behaviour was the subject of the essay "Of Human Virtue" written in the 18th century by Godwin, Mary Shelley's father. He stated that "Every child that is born, has within him a concealed magazine of excellence" but asks what can happen to this promise "when urged by so bitter oppression and such unendurable suffering?" Without the means to live well, without protection from the vagaries of life, Godwin foresaw a pathway to depravity. Frankenstein's monster cries out that "my heart yearned to be known and loved" and bemoans the fact that "No father had watched my infant days, no mother blessed me with smiles and kisses". He offers this as justification for the vengeance he reaps on

the world. This theme is not only enacted in *Frankenstein* and *Bladerunner* but implicit in *Jane Eyre* whose protagonist is alone without a family sitting at the window reading a book about birds in the North Pole (where Frankenstein's monster went). She survives the cruelty of being a child without love but becomes drawn to the darkness in Mr Rochester and is tempted.

The impact of absence of love in childhood also underlies many modern crime and mystery texts, genres with strong Gothic antecedents. In *Red Dragon* (the prequel to *Silence of the Lambs*) Thomas Harris falls back on lack of love during childhood in an attempt to justify the cruelty of the protagonist. He is a physically unattractive character whose appearance led to his rejection by his mother and maltreatment from his grandmother. As with Frankenstein, his mother was appalled by the monster she had created and deserted him. In response to the mistreatment he receives he becomes vengeful, but eventually succumbs to love. His relationship shows that tenderness beats within the monster's heart. This reminds us of Frankenstein's monster's plea for a mate to turn to for love. The relationship of the modern text to Romanticism is further elucidated by the dedication and the frequent references to Blake.

So the Gothic ideas promulgated by Mary Shelley see their apotheosis in the modern science fiction and thrillers of popular culture. And yet there is another seemingly different strand which emerges in *Dracula*.

The Romantic Movement not only rediscovered Shakespeare and established him as one of the greats, but sought to uncover the folk stories of the past. It was in folk stories like those collected by the Grimm Brothers that elements of the medieval superstitions were recorded for posterity. The supernatural of the Middle Ages, which emerged in folk stories, was the antithesis of scientific rationalism. These tales captured the vampire legend, later immortalised by Bram Stoker.¹ Like many Victorians living at a time of great scientific advances which challenged established ways of thought, Stoker was interested in the spiritual and attended spiritualist groups which included Oscar Wilde, H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling under the famous medium Mrs Blavatsky (Dixon, 1995). His foray into the spiritual led him to research such phenomena as vampires.

His novel was triggered by a dream of vampire women. The vampires are reminiscent of the evil visions in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* with "skin as white as leprosy...far liker death" and the "mysterious agency...sought in darkness and in light...a wandering hell in the eternal space" which is part of Byron's verse play *Manfred*. The image is also reminiscent of the first description of the nameless Frankenstein's monster: "His yellow skin...his hair was of a lustrous black...a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and black lips." Vampires become the immortal creatures that science tried to create through men such as Frankenstein and now struggles to destroy. In that respect, these monsters, vampires, are no different to the replicants and other "artificial" characters. In *Dracula*, men of science, Doctor Seward and the psychologist van Helsing, apply

¹ *The Nightmare Series* of videos distributed by Learning Essentials, Australia, shows the beginnings of *Dracula* and other texts and the evolution from the original to the 20th century

all that Victorian science can offer to overcome the vampire menace but find themselves struggling against something mightier than they.

The same dependence on science to overcome the threat of vampires is evident in *Blade*, a film of the nineties. The vampires are attacked with modern interpretations of the old methods: silver bullets, garlic essence. *Blade* represents the new type of vampire, a further development from the vampires of Ann Rice. What we can see in these adaptations is the relationship between the fears of a society and the vampire menace as well as the ineffectuality of science. In *Dracula*, written at a time of Victorian paradox in sexual matters, the woman becomes a frightening fiend, capable of tempting and destroying a man. Even Mina Harker, who represents the pure woman admired by Van Helsing, falls into the clutches of the vampire. Her best friend, Lucy, is much more easily overcome as she has a more lascivious personality and therefore a weaker temperament to resist temptation. Unlike Byron's and Coleridge's female vampires, however, Stoker's main vampire is a man with the power to control these women. This masculinity of the main vampire has persisted into popular images and yet the gender of the vampire slayer has changed in shows such as *Buffy*, celebrating the power of women and asserting a feminist perspective.

Anne Rice's vampires may be predominantly male but have different powers to Stoker's. They can die and they have weaknesses. They also have more ambivalent sexuality, a phenomenon of the age in which Rice was writing. They have received the ultimate accolade of being discussed as if real in Katherine Ramsland's *The Vampire Companion: The Official Guide to Anne Rice's The Vampire Chronicles* (1993). This text provides us not only with insights into Rice's vampires but also into the influence of the Romantic writers Blake and Keats on her work. Rice quotes Blake from *Auguries of Innocence* and acknowledges the impact of the description that "God is Light / To those Poor Souls who Dwell in Night". "Light becomes a God to them (vampires)", she writes, "but they're denied the face of God." In Rice we see clearly that even while adapting her vampires to the modern world, her work still retains the sense of darkness that the Romantics celebrated.

In *Blade* we witness a further transformation of the vampire with the focus on science and blood at a time of genetic research and AIDS. *Blade* himself is an African-American, with the power to save the white American population. The importance of ancestry which has become an issue in the late 20th and 21st centuries because of fertilisation programmes using anonymous sperm donors becomes a way of distinguishing the real vampires from the "wannabe" vampires and interestingly, *Blade*, the African-American, has the "blue blood", so to speak. Unlike most characters in *Dracula*, there are many in *Blade*'s world who seek the powers of the vampire and immortality. Stoker, similarly, acknowledges the presence of such followers in the character of the insane Renwick who yearns for the gift of immortality. The protagonist of *Blade*, however, represents a humanity that rejects evil and seeks to overcome the evil in himself, thus turning full circle and returning us to the themes of *Frankenstein*. Immortality may be sought but in the end it leads to a loss of humanity.

This loss of humanity is therefore the theme to which all these texts return, whatever the fear.

So what implications does this have for teaching? Listing the changes in the vampires won't lead to students who are critically literate, but linking these changes to patterns in a society will challenge students. Understanding the formulaic nature of the genre and exploring the links between modern popular texts and canonical texts serves to break down the so-called opposition of canon/popular and allows students to reevaluate their own textual experiences. It gives students entry to texts that they might have previously felt to be alienating and with no relationship to their own world or experiences.

The following exercises attempt to move students towards the ideas in the above text and encourage them to explore the issues that have been raised.

Exercise 1: How far have we moved in the way we see the Gothic?

Reviewers do not always echo the mood of the public but in their critiques they can offer an interesting starting point for this unit, often indicating a variance with the public. In the late eighteenth century, Coleridge wrote that popular culture is for the "Busy-Indolent and Lazy-Indolent. To both alike all thinking is painful." His attack on popular writers is defensive about "real writing" and accuses the public of a shallowness that is very reminiscent of contemporary arguments faced by Stephen King. It also indicates just how strong a following writers such as Mrs Radcliffe had, that their audience needed to be attacked in such a vehement way.

Mrs Radcliffe was the most popular writer of her period, earning far more than the Romantic poets. Her popularity led to many reviews of her work, including those written by Coleridge. In 1794 Coleridge wrote that in Mrs Radcliffe's work he found "Curiosity raised oftener than it is gratified". He claimed that "in the search for what is new, an author is apt to forget what is natural" and that Radcliffe's books "require character, unity of design, a delineation of the scenes of real life and the variety of well supported contrast." Coleridge, however, did not echo the sentiments of all reviewers of the period.

Exercise:

Ask students to use the internet to locate:

- Reviews of Mrs Radcliffe, Monk, Walpole, Poe or Bronte
- Reviews of modern Gothic writers: Stephen King, Anne Rice, Thomas Harris
- Analysis of readership of these books and extent of popularity (sales figures)

Discussion

Have the reviewers changed in the way they describe the texts?

What magazine/newspaper is the review from?

What is the expected audience of this magazine/newspaper and how does this influence the reviewer's attitude?

What expectations about the audience are suggested by this review?

Completing this exercise leads students into a discussion of what is valued in a text and suggests an opposition of the canon and the popular. Students could consider the question of who has the authority to declare which texts we value and why.

Exercise 2: From traditional to modern Gothic

The traditional Gothic text as developed by Mrs Radcliffe and her contemporaries was quite formulaic in its setting, characters, and structure. There are many lists of the features of the Gothic on internet sites but they don't show the transition into the modern, nor do they take into account texts such as *Frankenstein* which overturned the traditional Gothic and moved into a new realm, focusing on science as the creator of monsters.

Exercise:

- Ask students to use the internet or books on the Gothic to locate lists of features of the Gothic
- Alternately use *Dracula* (Van Helsing's statements of how vampires operate), *Chronicles of a Vampire* (Anne Rice offers her interpretation of the evolution of vampires), and the movie *Blade* (where Blade describes the changes to vampire fighting)
- Have them construct two columns named *Traditional Characteristics* of the Gothic and a second column named *Modern Interpretations*
- List findings under the subheadings: Setting, Characters, Themes
- Add the modern changes in the second column (For example, under setting, a castle ruin would become a deserted industrial landscape in *Blade*.)
- Try to apply Coleridge's comments ("curiosity is raised oftener than it is gratified", "in the search for what is new, the author is apt to forget what is natural", and books "require character, unity of design, a delineation of scenes of real life and the variety of well supported contrast") to modern Gothic texts.

Discussion

Ask the questions: Why do you think these changes have taken place?

What do the changes show about the society in which the texts were created?

This exercise makes students identify patterns in a culture and look more creatively at specific details; it shows how formulaic the structure still is while also highlighting the connection between the concerns of the times and the text. Ultimately, it can be seen that popular texts are part of the culture in which they were produced, while drawing on older texts.

Exercise 3: Intertextuality

The Gothic is perhaps the most derivative of all popular genres. *Frankenstein* is the precursor for a wide range of science fiction films, a progression from the Gothic. *Dracula* is similarly a model for modern vampire films and books.

The following developments can be traced by students:

Frankenstein:

- The Promethean myth (ancient Greek) to Shelley's poem *Prometheus Unbound* to *Frankenstein* to *Bladerunner* (Note that the film *Bladerunner* is suggestive of the Greek connection in the use of the owl, symbolic of Athens, in the opening sequences)

- Mary Shelley's own intertextual references in *Frankenstein* to Shelley's poetry and *Paradise Lost*.
- Other films dealing with the creation of new life or the alteration of life. In *Frankenstein* this taking over God's work leads to misery. Do the modern texts challenge this view or reinforce it? Have we moved away from the Romantic notions about the monsters we create?
- Find newspaper articles that refer to breakthroughs such as cloning and stem cell research. Students should notice that the Frankenstein legacy is pervasive even in these texts.²

Dracula:

- Research the history of Dracula to see the legend and folk story basis
- Trace the evolution of the vampire from Coleridge's *Christabel* to *Dracula* to modern texts.
- Do a close comparative study of *Dracula* and *Blade*
- Do a comparative study of *Dracula* and *Buffy* to look at the development of the vampire mythology, focusing especially on female images and the woman as slayer. Comparing the characters of Mina Harker and Lucy (looking closely at what the character, van Helsing, says about each) to Buffy should yield interesting differences.

This kind of discussion leads to speculation of why these changes have emerged. Historical research about scientific developments during the Romantic period would be illuminating in understanding *Frankenstein*. The same consideration of scientific discoveries of the late 20th Century would yield further insight into the production of *Bladerunner*. A brief overview of the constraints of the Victorian period might explain the attitudes to women in *Dracula*. Modern medical fears could explain the attitude to blood and vampires in *Blade*.

The aim in this exercise is to answer the same question as in the exercise above: How do contemporary social events influence texts?

Moderate derivative texts

- Compare *The Shining* to *The Masque of the Red Death* (Edgar Allan Poe)
- Locate the elements of Poe's story *The Raven* in the film *The Crow*
- Read the Romantic writer Blake's poetry and locate the references to him and his work in the book and film *The Red Dragon* (Thomas Harris)
- Read Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* and locate the references to the Romantic writers. How did they influence her?

What is the effect of using these canonical references in modern texts?

Why do modern authors/filmmakers seek to establish this connection?

This exercise returns to the idea of the opposition between the canon and the popular by suggesting that modern Gothic writers seek the status of the canonical texts through their references.

² In June, 2002, *The Weekend Australian Magazine* ran an article on "The Man who would be God", Trounsen, and labeled him a Frankenstein for his research.

FINAL WORDS

What I confirmed was that connecting research to popular culture creates an active classroom engaged in learning. Another satisfying element was that the students learnt to approach popular texts with greater insight, appreciative of the cultural heritage from which most popular texts are spawned. They began to understand the derivative nature of popular culture which asserts its difference by adapting older texts to modern contexts. This unit, more than any other, developed in students the critical faculties needed to read popular culture.

The final paradox is that the Gothic, this 18th century attack on the conventional, has itself become the most conventional of structures.

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