

Evolutionary Horror: The Shift of Gothic Literature Away from Classic Tropes

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The purpose of the story is ultimately to display the soul of its writer. To tell a story is to share a piece of oneself and give physical shape to the meaning of being human. However, being human is not always a pleasant experience. Life is full of joyful, sorrowful, and terrifying experiences, and the expression of this last and most potent emotion is the basis of the horror genre and gothic literature. Initially formed in the 1760s, Gothic literature separates itself from other genres by using gloomy atmospheres, grotesque creatures, psychological questions and examinations, and bouts of pure terror (Abrams 78-79). However, horror was not invented in gothic literature. Elements of horror can be found in all forms of literature, dating back to ancient Anglo-Saxon poetry. From the bloody and violent spectacles of battle showcased in *Beowulf* to the dark and tension-filled search for the ominous Mr. Hyde in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the genre of horror would slowly, but inevitably, march towards its absolute pinnacle, the slow, lurching, terrifying spectacle of modern gothic horror, *Frankenstein*.

Among the oldest pieces of English literature in existence, *Beowulf* is an ancient tale detailing the heroic achievements of the eponymous hero as he contends with, and ultimately defeats, a series of horrifying monsters. Like many other stories of its time, *Beowulf* was written as a heroic poem in alliterative verse. *Beowulf* has many essential components that represent ancient Anglo-Saxon civilization and their lives, and it contains a surprising number of horror elements for a heroic poem (Acker 703-04).

The overall theme behind the story of *Beowulf* is relatively typical for poems of its time. Its status as a heroic poem revolves around reverence for the famous hero Beowulf himself and his deeds. The story reverently displays his incredible strength when he tears off Grendel's arm (*Beowulf* 832-35). It shows the boldness with which he composes himself before the king of the land (415-18). It shows his bravery in pursuing Grendel's mother to her lair, and ultimately his humility and sense of duty as he gives up his life fighting the dragon so that his people may prosper (1492-95, 2817-20). Each of these details regarding Beowulf's life and deeds exemplifies his positive qualities to the reader and underscores his greatness in history.

Beowulf's greatness also stands in stark contrast to the dark and melancholic atmosphere of the setting. Set in Scandinavia, a place known for its bitter winters and stormy weather, *Beowulf* begins with a dark and sorrowful tone of the funeral of Shield Sheafson: "They stretched their beloved lord in his boat, laid out by the mast amidships, the great ring giver" (34-36). This sorrowful atmosphere constantly pervades through the entirety of the story, and it is only worsened by the arrival of Grendel himself: "So Grendel ruled in defiance of right, one against all, until the greatest house in the world stood empty, a deserted wallstead. For twelve winters, seasons of woe" (144-149).

This usage of decay to emphasize the hero lends further significance to the achievements of Beowulf in his story and how his life progresses. Having defeated Grendel, Beowulf quickly finds himself battling Grendel's Mother, who attacks Heorot in vengeful anger (1275-95). Following the defeat of Grendel's mother and the subsequent celebrations in Heorot, the story has a time gap in which Beowulf becomes king after a series of grueling battles that leads to the death of the king before him (2200-08). Finally, the story ends with the tragic battle with the dragon, and Beowulf's death and funeral, followed shortly by the overrunning of his tribe by other tribes from the north and south (Elden 449).



Beyond the dark and melancholy atmosphere and the magnificence of Beowulf himself, the legend of *Beowulf* is quite famous for its somewhat ambiguous description of monsters. Grendel is described as a deformed descendent of Cain, his mother is a hag-like abomination of the same line, and the dragon itself is described as a snakelike creature with enameled scales (104-14, 1259-63, 2568-77). The reasons for such descriptions are that the monsters of *Beowulf* are secondary focuses compared to Beowulf himself. Nevertheless, despite this lack of focus on the monsters of the story, each, in some manner, does represent something to Beowulf and his culture.

Symbolism and psychology go hand in hand in the story of *Beowulf*. Each creature represents a different challenge that Beowulf must overcome in his journey, and these challenges are not merely physical in nature. When the monstrous Grendel is first introduced, it is made clear that he is from the line of Cain and is an outcast as a result (106-07). With hospitality denied to him due to his heritage, Grandal is outraged to see the joyous celebration of those who shun him from society and seek his vengeance against them (Elden 449). Later, when Grendel's Mother appears, she, in turn, is vengeful for her son's death. In this manner, she represents a blood feud, another common event in ancient Anglo-Saxon society that Beowulf manages to overcome (Greenblatt 39, Elden 450, Acker 705).

However, Beowulf fights one more creature in this story, the dragon, and despite his victory over it, he is mortally wounded in the process (2711-28). Dragons symbolize many things in history, but throughout most of Europe, they are seen as creatures representing catastrophe (Robert 520). In the case of *Beowulf*, the dragon embodies chaos as it ravages the land around it (Acker 702). It is also possible that the dragon represents something internal to Beowulf's people: a rising level of greed and corruption that the poem itself represents through the dragon (Dubois 822).

Ultimately, while *Beowulf* may not be a true horror story, it most certainly contains horror elements. It includes grotesque creatures, psychological self-examination and reflection, death, violence, and a dark, gloomy, melancholic atmosphere where aspects of humanity's rage, retribution, and greed are represented by terrible beings at war with the forces of good and the heroes that comprise it.

However, despite the horror elements in *Beowulf*, the first true "horror" book would not be written for another 2,100 years during the age of enlightenment. During this time, the industrial age began, the scientific theory was developed, and humanity slowly shifted from relying on religious principles to explain the world to science and rationality. Libraries and printing presses were becoming commonplace, and for the first time, books were becoming available to the general populace (Punter 21). In the new age of the industrial revolution, a new genre would be born in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. This dark and disturbing novel used gloomy atmospheres, supernatural elements, and a dark and pervasive mystery as its driving force rather than as a secondary detail (Abrams 78-79). Walpole found great success in his story and eventually began advertising his books as the first example of an entirely new genre of literature: gothic literature ("Gothic Novel").

The ideals of Horace Walpole would ultimately set the stage for Gothic literature as a whole and, with it, the later story of Robert Luis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Set in the urban sprawls of a rapidly expanding industrial London, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a story of the dark mystery surrounding the relationship of the shy and introspective Dr. Jekyll and his foul and disturbing friend, Mr. Hyde. The story itself is set in a first-person perspective from another of the good doctor's friends, Mr. Gabriel John Utterson

(Stevenson 887). Mr. Utterson first becomes aware of the existence of Mr. Hyde from yet another friend of his named Mr. Enfield, who first points out the man's existence while the two are watching Dr. Jekyll's house (Stevenson 889). Curious at his friend's uneasy attitude towards the man, Mr. Utterson begins to become obsessed with the mystery behind the strange Mr. Hyde. This obsession leads him on an adventure of dark discovery, strange near-supernatural events, and ultimately discovering Dr. Jekyll's darkest secret about Mr. Hyde.

The first notable detail when looking at *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is its theme of mystery. Throughout the story, the quiet and good-natured Dr. Jekyll grows increasingly erratic and unpredictable towards the protagonist, Mr. Utterson. He admits that he knows of Mr. Hyde and that he has an interest in the man despite his unnerving demeanor and sense of wrongness: "But I do sincerely take a great, a very great interest in that young man" (Stevenson 898). He shuts out Mr. Utterson's attempts to interact with him, and grows more and more distant with every page, before finally seeming to lose himself in anxiety in light of the murder committed by Mr. Hyde: "I have lost confidence in myself" (Stevenson 902).

Unlike the biblical descriptions used in the story of *Beowulf* to explain the existence of Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon, the themes of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* revolve primarily around the use of science and a small touch of the supernatural. Dr. Jekyll himself devises a tincture to separate the two halves of his soul from each other, good and evil: "but managed to compound a drug by which these powers should be dethroned from their supremacy, and a second form and countenance substitutes" (Stevenson 920). Although the revelation of this theme is committed late in the story, nevertheless, it sets the story's major theme as the duality of human nature. The mention of duality in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* also maintains some parallels with the real world and the concept of behavioral degeneration in moral standards that were inspired by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which was also popular during that time (Maxwell 48).

In many ways, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* imitates the melancholic atmosphere of *Beowulf* with its tone: "Although a fog rolled over the city in the small hours, the early part of the night was cloudless, and the lane, which the maid's window overlooked, was brilliantly lit by the full moon" (Stevenson 898). However, the purposes of that atmosphere are entirely different by comparison to *Beowulf*. In the case of *Beowulf*, the purpose of the gloomy atmosphere is to emphasize the need for a hero in the story. In *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the atmosphere is used to directly affect the audience's emotion, to heighten the tension, set the tone of mystery, and add to the menace of the elusive Mr. Hyde.

On the topic of monsters, the focus of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is both similar and different to the nightmarish creatures of *Beowulf*. In both stories, the monster is an antagonist to the main character. However, in *Beowulf*, the monster's primary purpose is to fight and die in combat with Beowulf himself. By comparison, Mr. Hyde in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* seems a far less prominent and violent monster than Grendel in *Beowulf*. The true purpose of Mr. Hyde is to act as more of a driving factor than a true threat, and the final confrontation with Mr. Hyde himself is relatively tame. Once cornered, Mr. Hyde simply chooses to take his own life (Stevenson 912). Despite Mr. Hyde's unnerving demeanor, he is a background character for most of the story, and much of the story's efforts appear focused on the search for him and the truth behind his relationship with Dr. Jekyll rather than the confrontation itself.

With the role of Mr. Hyde being determined, the psychology behind the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde also becomes clear. Like Grendel, Mr. Hyde is impulsive, angry, and

spiteful towards a world that views him with distrust. His rage-fueled murder of Sir Danvers Carew is something brought on by his long-term confinement under the consciousness of Dr. Jekyll, and this imitates Grendel's isolation due to his family line. Mr. Hyde is also referred to as "Pure Evil" by Dr. Jekyll, which allows him to fill a similar role to the dragon in *Beowulf*. Simultaneously, the existence of both Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in the same body demonstrates a clear example of multiple personality disorder in which Dr. Jekyll is the dominant personality but delegates shameful acts to Mr. Hyde to ease his conscience (Stefen 213). This concern of degeneration also highlights the story's overall relationship with horror as a whole, which often entices its audience into evaluating dire problems of the core of humanity by giving them a character that is endangered by those circumstances that they can then empathize with (Aistrophe and Fishel 633).

Symbolism also plays a significant part in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to represent the psychological struggles of Dr. Jekyll himself. Dr. Jekyll's house and its brick walls with no windows on the bottom floors are representative of his need to maintain control over this representation of his mind. When Mr. Utterson finally breaks down the door, it represents the final barrier breaking down between him and Mr. Hyde. Dr. Jekyll's walking stick is another important detail behind the story. Canes or walking sticks were often symbols of upper-class members in industrial Britain, and the furnishings of Dr. Jekyll's home and its location in upper-class Soho suggests that Dr. Jekyll himself was an upper-class gentleman (Maxwell 50). The destruction of the cane during the murder symbolizes the major moment when Dr. Jekyll's mind truly splits from Mr. Hyde, and the two truly become separate entities.

Ultimately, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a perfect example of Gothic literature in its most literal sense. It combines a dark, mysterious atmosphere, a deep psychological introspection, a mysterious and unnerving monster, and a unique blend of science and the supernatural. Simultaneously, it also embodies the practical application of narrative control, which is a significant element that defines horror overall (Stewart 33-34). This perfect blend of pacing and questions sets it apart from *Beowulf* by putting aside the goal and the action of the story to present the readers a long, frightening, and exciting journey to discover with a simple question that the entirety of its universe revolves around: What is the secret of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?

Without a doubt, though, the final example of Gothic literature is the most recognized in its entire unnerving lineup: Shelly's *Frankenstein* (Lancaster 132). The story of *Frankenstein* is a tale of horror and loneliness in a cold, violent, uncaring world. Set from the perspective of a sea captain named Robert Walton, the story follows a series of narratives from a stranded and mysterious doctor named Dr. Frankenstein, whom Captain Walton rescues from an ice flow and nurses back to health. Dr. Frankenstein himself tells his tale through a narrative to Captain Walton with the intent to increase his understanding and to help ease his concern over his own challenges: "I do not know that the relation of my misfortune will be useful to you, yet, if you are inclined, listen to my tale" (Shelley 15). The rest of the story of *Frankenstein* is a retelling of the tale of his creation of a creature through science that would act as the antagonist for the duration of the story and his interactions and conflicts with that creature.

The two major themes of *Frankenstein* are creation and responsibility. Though Dr. Frankenstein does succeed in the creation of life through science, he fails to initially take responsibility for that experiment when he flees from his lab: "Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room" (Shelley 44). This choice by Dr. Frankenstein reflects much the same decision of Dr. Jekyll in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to

abuse his tincture to seek pleasure as Mr. Hyde: "I was the first that ever did so for his pleasures" (Stevenson 922). However, the failure to take initial responsibility also sets it as nearly opposite of *Beowulf*, where honor, integrity, and bravery are the key focuses of the hero.

Another key similarity between the three stories is the atmosphere. Similar to both *Beowulf* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the various settings of *Frankenstein* share a specific and melancholic atmosphere. However, its purpose is far different from those of the previous two stories. From the Arctic Circle to Dr. Frankenstein's Laboratory to the Alps, each setting is far from other people, either physically or symbolically. The reason for this distance is to emphasize the separation and outcast nature of the main characters and cement the story itself in the gothic genre. This same atmosphere also follows the example set by *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by using it to heighten tension in between events: "It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out" (Shelley 43).

However, the biggest difference between *Frankenstein*, compared to *Beowulf* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, is its focus on its monster. Unlike *Beowulf*, which uses its monsters to aggrandize its protagonist, or *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which hides its monster in the background as a driving force for its mystery, the story of *Frankenstein* revolves in its entirety around the monster. The creature is mentioned at the beginning of the story, where the ship's team spots him in the distance. He is the focus of Dr. Jekyll's chilling narrative, and his narrative and interactions with his creator are the core of the entirety of the story. Even the book's final moments focus on the creature as it floats away on an ice raft (Shelley 240). There is not a single moment of the story of *Frankenstein* that is not connected to the monster or details regarding it, which makes the monster the main focus of the story.

In terms of psychology, the creature of Dr. Frankenstein shares a surprising number of similarities to the creatures of the aforementioned two stories mentioned. Like Grandal, Frankenstein's monster is an outcast from society, shunned for a damning deformity of his nature that he cannot control. He is shown so little compassion by his creator he is not even given a name (Lancaster 134). Alone and rejected by everyone he meets; Frankenstein's creature becomes vengeful against humanity for their cruel shunning of him. Much like *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, this message plays to the horror genre as a whole for its highlighting of the dehumanization of monsters in horror stories overall (Aistrope and Fishel 638). Also, like Mr. Hyde, Frankenstein's monster must be stealthy due to his deformity and spends much of the story hiding from others: "but I was shut out from with them, except through means which I obtained by stealth, when I was unseen and unknown" (Shelley 118).

Lastly, the symbolism shown in *Frankenstein* revolves heavily around mythological references, biblical references, and irony. The irony of the story is showcased in the treatment of Dr. Frankenstein by Robert Walton. In nursing the doctor back to health, Captain Walton gives the reader a chance to see a ghostly concept of what a relationship between Frankenstein and his own creature might have been like had he not been so horrified by it (Terry 299-300). The story of *Frankenstein* also recreates several scenes from the book of Genesis, with Dr. Frankenstein acting as God and his monster acting as Adam. Much like God, Dr. Frankenstein builds his creature from scratch, gives it life, becomes horrified by the actions of his creation, and decides to destroy it just as God does in the book of Genesis (NIV Genesis 6:6). His creature even mentions this comparison during one of his conversations with his creator: "I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed" (Shelley

94). The use of biblical quotations and references is another detail that *Frankenstein* shares with *Beowulf* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. However, *Frankenstein* does not use religion to justify actions the protagonist does or events the protagonist experiences as *Beowulf* does.

Ultimately, stories such as *Frankenstein*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and many other Gothic stories share common features with *Beowulf* and others. They share similar atmospheres, the inclusion of hideous monsters, questions of introspection, and more. However, they also deviate from each other in using those same elements, such as the focus of the monsters in question, the purpose of the atmosphere, the purposes of the various symbols, and the developing themes of science and the supernatural combined. These things all come together to reveal the characteristics of what defines a gothic novel and to establish them into their own literary genre.

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