

Aspects of the Science Fiction Genre in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

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It is generally known that Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* in response to a suggestion by the poet Lord Byron during the summer of 1816 that his house guests should each write a horror story. As a result, most of their story ideas centered around ghosts or vampires in a mode known as Gothic. Most of the contemporary novelists at that age wrote different types of gothic novels. Mary worked through the summer and the following year to complete her story. The original Gothic mode may be briefly described as one which embodied ghosts, the evil and the good. "The Gothic novels", J. A. Cuddon illustrates, "contain a strong element of the supernatural ... wild and desolate landscapes,... monstrous apparitions and curses, ... malevolent witches, demoniac powers...".¹ But in the place of miracle she employed science, instead of the exotic she displayed the concrete and she manipulated and combined a complex human and imaginative one.

Although *Frankenstein* employs most of the formal properties of the science fiction genre, it is never treated as such. In fact, this novel is, by now, one of the classics of the Gothic novel. This is due to a variety of reasons that mostly relates to the conditions of its writing and literary convention of the early nineteenth century. The novel was written in a time when the Gothic novel was at its vogue, newly established by the European romanticism.

Contemporary reviewers, moreover, helped in the establishment of a life-long categorization of *Frankenstein* as a Gothic novel. As neither science nor literary criticism were that progressive, or at least ready, to admit the birth of a new genre that takes its inspiration from science, reviewers of *Frankenstein* had to recourse to already existing generic modes in the categorization of this novel.² The circumstances under which this novel was produced helped to further this generic designation since the novel was declaredly written as a "horror" story in response to Lord Byron's offer.

Nevertheless, the science fiction elements in this novel are so powerful and subversive that modern critical opinion finds it inconvenient to read this novel as singularly Gothic. Indeed, many twentieth-century critics have come to recognize the potential of *Frankenstein* as, not only a science fiction novel, but the first in this genre. Jon Turney believes that Mary's "story about finding the secret of life became one of the most