Lesson 4: Romantic Gothic Fiction: The Brontës & Shelley

Duration: 3hours

This lecture explores the Romantic Gothic tradition by examining its key tropes and how they manifest in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. The lesson will focus on how these novels critique scientific ambition, gender norms, and class structures, using Gothic elements as a mode of both social critique and psychological exploration.

1. Introduction: The Gothic in Romantic Fiction

Definition of Gothic Fiction

Gothic fiction is a literary genre that emerged in the late 18th century, characterized by its fusion of horror, the supernatural, psychological intensity, and a deep engagement with emotional and aesthetic extremes. It is marked by a fascination with the mysterious and the macabre, often set in antiquated or decaying locations such as castles, abbeys, or desolate landscapes. These settings serve not merely as backdrops, but as symbolic spaces reflecting internal states: madness, desire, fear, and the unconscious.

At its core, Gothic fiction is concerned with the boundaries between the known and the unknown, the rational and the irrational, the real and the imagined. It stages conflicts between Enlightenment rationality and emerging Romantic ideals, particularly emotion, imagination, and the sublime. The genre is a response to historical anxieties: the destabilization of traditional authority, the rise of secularism, scientific advancements, and shifting gender and class roles.

Some defining features include:

- **Haunted Landscapes and Architectural Spaces**: These are often symbolic of the characters' internal turmoil. In *Wuthering Heights* (1847), the bleak Yorkshire moors mirror the wild passions and social alienation of its characters. Similarly, *Jane Eyre* (1847) features Thornfield Hall, a gothic mansion hiding the literal and metaphorical madness of Bertha Mason, Rochester's imprisoned wife. The architecture becomes a site where secrets and repressions are embodied and dramatized.

- **Byronic Heroes**: Drawing from Lord Byron's poetic archetype, Gothic fiction often features brooding, charismatic, and morally ambiguous male figures. These characters— such as Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, and Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) embody a tortured complexity that blurs the line

between villainy and heroism. Their tragic grandeur often arises from inner torment, isolation, and a defiance of conventional morality.

- **Themes of Madness, Repression, and Forbidden Knowledge**: Gothic fiction frequently explores psychological fragmentation and transgressive desires. Victor Frankenstein's obsessive quest to uncover the secrets of life itself, motivated by scientific ambition and emotional loss, culminates in a horrifying confrontation with the creature he brings to life, symbolizing the dangers of unchecked human aspiration. Similarly, the locked rooms and secret chambers common in Gothic texts represent psychological repression and social taboo.

The Romantic Movement and Gothic Fiction

The Gothic genre developed alongside and in tension with the Romantic movement. While Romanticism (c. 1780–1850) privileged the individual's emotional, imaginative, and spiritual engagement with the world, valorizing the sublime, the pastoral, and the power of nature, Gothic fiction emerged as its shadow form. It explored what Romanticism often repressed: fear, transgression, and the irrational.

Romanticism and the Gothic are not strictly oppositional, however; rather, the Gothic intensifies the emotional extremity and subjective experience central to Romanticism but redirects them toward darker terrains. Where Romantic writers celebrated natural beauty and human potential, Gothic writers questioned the price of that idealism, especially the cost of violating nature or society's moral codes in pursuit of personal or intellectual fulfillment.

For instance:

- **Emotion and the Sublime**: Romantic thinkers like Edmund Burke distinguished between the beautiful and the sublime, the latter evoking awe and terror. Gothic fiction adopts the sublime's emotional charge but places it in unsettling contexts: stormy mountain passes, desolate ruins, or monstrous creations. Shelley's *Frankenstein* repeatedly invokes sublime landscapes that both inspire and dwarf human agency.

- **The Individual vs. Society**: Both traditions focus on the individual's struggle with society, but the Gothic dramatizes this through isolation, madness, or exile. The Gothic protagonist is often alienated, a figure of psychological or social liminality.

- **Ambivalence Toward Progress**: Romanticism often celebrated human creativity and imagination, but Gothic fiction interrogates their darker consequences. In *Frankenstein*, the very pursuit of knowledge—typically Romantic in its aspiration, is transformed into a source of horror, suggesting that certain boundaries, once transgressed, lead not to enlightenment but to chaos.

In summary, Gothic fiction within the Romantic period serves both as a mirror and a critique: it mirrors Romanticism's concern with emotion, nature, and subjectivity, but critiques its idealism by foregrounding the monstrous, the repressed, and the catastrophic potential of human ambition.

2. *Frankenstein* and the Critique of Enlightenment Science

Scientific Ambition and the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment, spanning the 17th to early 19th centuries, was characterized by a profound confidence in human reason, empirical observation, and the potential for progress through scientific inquiry. Central to Enlightenment ideology was the belief that nature could be understood, categorized, and ultimately controlled by the rational mind. Philosophers like Francis Bacon and René Descartes helped shape a vision of science as a systematic, almost heroic endeavor to liberate humanity from superstition, ignorance, and suffering.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), however, serves as a profound literary interrogation—and at times, a scathing critique: of this faith in human mastery over nature. Through the character of Victor Frankenstein, Shelley dramatizes the dangers of Enlightenment hubris: the belief that knowledge and progress are inherently good and should be pursued at all costs. The novel is not anti-science per se, but it is deeply skeptical of unreflective scientific ambition divorced from ethical responsibility and emotional empathy.

Victor's obsessive pursuit of forbidden knowledge: the "elixir of life" and the animation of dead matter, echoes Enlightenment ideals of conquering nature, yet the consequences are catastrophic. The novel thus questions the morality of scientific overreach and the psychological cost of a purely rational worldview that neglects affect, community, and relational responsibility.

Key Passages for Analysis

1. Victor's Ambition

"What glory would attend the discovery if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!"

This passage captures Victor's Promethean aspirations and echoes Enlightenment optimism about the transformative power of science. The language of "glory" reveals a desire not only for humanitarian progress but also for personal fame and god-like power. Victor imagines eradicating disease: an ultimate Enlightenment fantasy: yet this desire is driven by ego and isolation rather than collective good.

2. The Creature's Suffering

"I am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind?"

This line is pivotal in Shelley's exploration of emotional and social alienation: a consequence not only of Victor's scientific overreach but also of Enlightenment neglect of the emotional and ethical dimensions of humanity. The Creature, despite his physical monstrosity, is initially benevolent, intelligent, and empathetic. His descent into violence is a product of societal rejection, emotional deprivation, and paternal abandonment.

Shelley subverts Enlightenment assumptions that knowledge alone can lead to human betterment. The Creature educates himself by reading *Paradise Lost*, *Plutarch*, and *The Sorrows of Werter*, gaining moral awareness: but his intellectual development does not protect him from pain. On the contrary, it deepens his suffering by making him fully aware of his exclusion from human community. His misery stems not from ignorance but from rejection.

The Creature becomes a mirror for Victor: both are alienated, both are creators (Victor of life, the Creature of his own morality), and both are victims of unchecked ambition. Shelley invites us to consider the ethical responsibilities of creation: whether scientific, artistic, or parental.

Walton's Letters and the Cautionary Frame

"You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been."

The novel's epistolary frame, composed of Captain Walton's letters to his sister Margaret, positions Walton as a parallel figure to Victor: a man driven by the pursuit of forbidden knowledge, in this case, the navigation of the polar regions. Victor's final words to Walton serve as a cautionary tale, an admonition to temper ambition with wisdom and humility.

Shelley uses Walton to illustrate that the Enlightenment's legacy is not merely scientific—it is also imperial and exploratory. The drive to "conquer the unknown" is implicated in colonial expansion as much as scientific discovery. Victor's metaphor of the serpent evokes the Biblical Fall, implying that the pursuit of knowledge, if unregulated, can lead to a catastrophic loss of innocence and moral order.

Walton ultimately heeds Victor's warning, choosing to turn back and preserve the lives of his crew. This decision contrasts with Victor's unyielding obsession, suggesting that there is redemption in restraint and a more ethical model of curiosity.

Concluding remarks:

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* presents a nuanced and prophetic critique of Enlightenment science by interrogating the costs of ambition, the limits of reason, and the ethical demands of creation. The novel does not reject knowledge or progress outright but insists that they must be pursued with humility, empathy, and responsibility. Through its layered narrative structure and complex characters, *Frankenstein* remains a foundational text for discussions about the

intersection of science, ethics, and the human condition in both the Romantic and contemporary imagination.

3. *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*: Passion, Gender, and Social Class

Gender and Power in the Brontës' Novels

Charlotte and Emily Brontë's novels are deeply concerned with the intersection of passion, gender roles, and social hierarchy. As works of the mid-19th century, *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) inhabit a Victorian culture that idealized feminine submission, domesticity, and moral purity—ideals famously crystallized in the trope of the **"Angel in the House"**, a term popularized by Coventry Patmore's poem and critically interrogated by later feminist scholars.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their landmark feminist study *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), argue that women writers of the 19th century were often forced to navigate a dichotomous vision of womanhood: the idealized, passive "angel" and the disruptive, emotional, and transgressive "madwoman." This binary structure is dramatized in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, where female protagonists negotiate their desires and identities within, and often against, patriarchal constraints.

***Jane Eyre*: Autonomy, Love, and Moral Integrity**

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is often read as a proto-feminist bildungsroman that charts a young woman's quest for selfhood, spiritual integrity, and emotional fulfillment. Jane consistently resists the dominant gender ideology that equates femininity with submission and self-sacrifice.

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will."

This iconic assertion of agency is spoken when Jane refuses to become Rochester's mistress after discovering his existing marriage to Bertha Mason. Here, Jane not only asserts her moral autonomy but challenges the patriarchal assumption that love is conditional upon female subordination. Her refusal to be "ensnared" invokes the imagery of domestic entrapment and connects to a broader Gothic tradition of women imprisoned in literal or metaphorical cages.

Jane's insistence on equality in her relationship with Rochester, and her choice to leave him when such equality is impossible, subverts the Victorian model of the obedient wife. Her return to him later in the novel: after his physical and symbolic fall from patriarchal dominance, marks a shift in the gender dynamic. Jane comes back not as a dependent but as an empowered equal, with financial independence and moral authority.

Wuthering Heights: Destructive Love and Social Constraint

Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* offers a more radical, elemental vision of passion and identity, one that resists conventional moral or social resolution. At the heart of the novel is the obsessive, almost metaphysical bond between Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff: a love that transcends earthly boundaries and social propriety.

Heathcliff: "I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!"

This declaration is not merely a romantic exaggeration but a deeply Gothic articulation of existential despair and desire. Heathcliff and Catherine's relationship is often read as a union of kindred spirits violently torn apart by social structures, namely, class mobility and patriarchal expectations. Catherine famously says, "I am Heathcliff," suggesting a collapse of boundaries between self and other, eros and identity.

However, Catherine chooses to marry Edgar Linton for status and social stability, revealing the constraints imposed on women by class expectations and inheritance laws. Her internal conflict—between social duty and wild, passionate affinity, exemplifies the gendered cost of Victorian respectability. Unlike Jane Eyre, Catherine does not reconcile love and autonomy; instead, her divided loyalties lead to psychological breakdown and early death.

The novel's complex narrative structure (told through unreliable narrators and temporal layering) enhances its Gothic instability and reflects the chaotic emotional landscapes of its characters. *Wuthering Heights* refuses to moralize passion or punish transgression in conventional ways, offering instead a radical meditation on the destructive and sublime dimensions of love.

The Gothic, Gender, and Social Class

Both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* engage with the Gothic tradition not merely to create suspense or terror, but to dramatize the psychological and social realities of women's lives in a restrictive society. The "madwoman in the attic" trope, embodied by Bertha Mason, becomes a metaphor for the repressed rage, desire, and resistance of women who cannot conform to the role of the angel. In both novels, madness, passion, and hauntings are ways of giving voice to what is otherwise silenced in polite, patriarchal society.

Moreover, both texts interrogate the rigid class hierarchies of Victorian England. Jane's refusal to marry Rochester as his mistress is also a refusal to transgress class boundaries under the pretense of love. Heathcliff's outsider status: racially ambiguous, orphaned, and without property, marks him as a class and cultural threat to the landed gentry. Yet his economic rise only deepens his alienation, suggesting that social mobility cannot redeem structural injustice.

Concluding Remarks

Through Gothic motifs, the Brontë sisters probe the limits of love, autonomy, and identity in a society that polices women's bodies, desires, and voices. *Jane Eyre* offers a vision of female self-determination within a moral and emotional framework, while *Wuthering Heights* presents a more chaotic and tragic vision of passion's defiance of social order. Both novels contribute profoundly to the evolution of the Gothic tradition as a space for exploring transgressive emotion and radical subjectivity.

In our next session, we will shift from the Gothic and Romantic legacies in fiction to the poetic responses to modernity in the Victorian age. As Britain underwent profound economic and social transformation during the Industrial Revolution, poets like Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning grappled with questions of identity, agency, and alienation. We will examine *Tennyson's "Ulysses"* as a reflection of Victorian heroism and existential restlessness, and explore Browning's *dramatic monologues* as psychological portraits shaped by the tensions of a rapidly industrializing society. Together, these works reveal how poetry became a vital medium for negotiating the moral and philosophical dilemmas of the 19th century.

Evaluation Task*: In a short essay, discuss how does Shelley's Frankenstein explore the dangers of unchecked ambition?*