The Gothic Feminine: Subversion and Empowerment in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre

Haider Abd Alabbas Hammadi
General Directorate of Education in Muthanna Governorate
Obaidiobaidi2017@gmail.com

Abstract:

This study investigates the Gothic feminine as a site of subversion and empowerment in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Drawing on feminist literary theory, particularly Ellen Moers' concept of the "Female Gothic," Gilbert and Gubar's "angel/monster" dichotomy, and Salo's model of "vetted self-affirmation," the study employs a qualitative, comparative textual analysis to examine how each author reconfigures Gothic conventions to articulate distinct feminist critiques. The analysis reveals that Shelley deploys tropes of absence, silence, and failed creation to expose the catastrophic consequences of patriarchal exclusion of the feminine, especially in reproductive and narrative domains. In contrast, Brontë harnesses motifs of haunting, confinement, and doubled identity to stage Jane Eyre's moral and narrative self-assertion, transforming Gothic spaces into arenas of ethical agency. Findings demonstrate that while *Frankenstein* functions as a cautionary tale rooted in negation, *Jane Eyre* enacts a prescriptive model of presence, together tracing an evolving trajectory of Gothic feminism from diagnostic lament to self-authored liberation. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how the Gothic mode enabled nineteenth-century women writers to encode resistance within seemingly conventional forms, offering both covert critique and visionary redefinition of female subjectivity.

Keywords: Bertha Mason, confinement, doubling, Female Gothic, haunting, narrative authority, Wollstonecraftian feminism

1. Introduction

The Gothic tradition in nineteenth-century British literature has long served as a fertile ground for the articulation of cultural anxieties, psychological complexities, and socio-political critiques. Within this literary mode, the works of Mary Shelley and Charlotte Brontë stand as seminal interventions that reconfigure Gothic conventions to interrogate gendered norms and challenge patriarchal authority. Both *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Jane Eyre* (1847) deploy quintessential Gothic elements, spectral presences, isolated domestic spaces, psychological fragmentation, and transgressive desires, not merely for atmospheric effect but as strategic instruments of feminist critique (Hasan & Rezapour, 2025). These narratives transform the Gothic from a genre of passive terror into a discourse of active resistance, embedding within their structures coded yet potent assertions of female agency, intellectual autonomy, and moral self-definition.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, often hailed as the first science fiction novel, subverts the Romantic ideal of masculine genius by exposing the catastrophic consequences of reproductive and creative authority severed from maternal ethics and relational responsibility (Lopez, 2018). Though its female characters appear marginal or silenced, their very absence functions as a structural critique of a world that excludes the feminine from the processes of creation, education, and narrative control (Salo, 2021). Similarly, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* appropriates Gothic tropes to chart a heroine's journey from social invisibility to self-assertion, using the haunted corridors of Thornfield Hall and the spectral figure of Bertha Mason as symbolic manifestations of repressed female desire and systemic confinement (Hasan & Rezapour, 2025). Far from conforming to the angelic ideal of Victorian womanhood, Jane insists on moral and emotional parity, declaring, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me" (Brontë, 1847, as cited in Hasan & Rezapour, 2025, p. 352).

Scholars have increasingly recognized that the Gothic feminine in these texts operates not through overt rebellion but through subversive indirection, what Patricia Spacks terms "subterranean challenges" to patriarchy (Salo, 2021, p. 3). The genre's inherent ambiguity allows Shelley and Brontë to encode feminist dissent within narratives that outwardly adhere to the moral and domestic expectations of their time. This duality enables the texts to circulate publicly while simultaneously addressing female readers in a covert, intimate register. As Gilbert and Gubar (1979) famously argued, the "madwoman in the attic" is not merely a plot device but the symbolic embodiment of the

female author's repressed rage and creative power, a figure as central to *Jane Eyre* as the absent mother or destroyed female creature is to *Frankenstein* (Lopez, 2018; Salo, 2021).

Despite extensive scholarship on the feminist dimensions of both novels, a systematic comparative analysis of how Shelley and Brontë differently mobilize Gothic structures to negotiate female identity, voice, and empowerment remains underexplored. This article contends that while Shelley critiques the erasure of the feminine through negation and absence, Brontë reclaims it through presence, speech, and ethical self-determination. Together, their works trace an evolving trajectory of Gothic feminism, from cautionary exposure of patriarchal violence to the assertion of a resilient, self-authored subjectivity. By examining the mechanisms of subversion and empowerment in these two cornerstone texts, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how the Gothic functioned as both a mask and a mouthpiece for nineteenth-century women writers navigating the constraints of authorship, gender, and genre.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical Background

The Gothic mode, particularly as reimagined by women writers in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, provided a uniquely capacious aesthetic for articulating feminist resistance under conditions of patriarchal constraint. Central to this reconceptualization is Ellen Moers' foundational notion of the "Female Gothic," which she defines as a literary tradition in which women writers employed coded narrative strategies to articulate anxieties surrounding domestic entrapment, sexual vulnerability, and the erasure of female agency (Moers, 1976, as cited in Hasan & Rezapour, 2025, p. 348). Moers posits that the Female Gothic functions not merely as a genre of terror but as a "birth myth," a symbolic exploration of the psychological and corporeal traumas of reproduction, maternity, and creation when filtered through a feminine lens (Moers, 1976, p. 80). This framework proves especially apt for reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a text that reconfigures the myth of Prometheus through the absence of the maternal and the usurpation of reproductive power by a solitary male scientist (Lopez, 2018; Salo, 2021).

Expanding upon Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) introduces the "angel/monster" dichotomy as a critical heuristic for understanding how nineteenth-century women writers externalized internalized conflicts about authorship, autonomy, and identity. In their analysis, the "madwoman," whether literal or symbolic, functions as

the repressed double of the compliant heroine, embodying the rage, desire, and creative ambition that patriarchal society demands women suppress (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 17). This dialectic illuminates both Bertha Mason's spectral presence in *Jane Eyre* and the constructed monstrosity of Shelley's Creature, who, though male in form, assumes the affective and narrative position of the feminized outcast (Hasan & Rezapour, 2025; Salo, 2021).

More recently, feminist scholars have refined these models by emphasizing the strategic ambiguity and "subterranean challenges" embedded in Gothic fiction (Spacks, 1975, as cited in Salo, 2021, p. 3). Diane Long Hoeveler (1998) argues that women's Gothic writing constitutes a "professionalization of gender," wherein female authors transformed their social marginality into narrative authority by appropriating and subverting Gothic conventions such as confinement, persecution, and supernatural intervention (Hoeveler, 1998, p. 5; Hasan & Rezapour, 2025, p. 350). Rather than offering overt political manifestos, these texts encode resistance within moralized frameworks that simultaneously satisfy and subvert Victorian expectations of feminine propriety (Hasan & Rezapour, 2025, p. 350).

Critically, the Gothic feminine does not merely reflect oppression but actively reconfigures it. As Hayley Salo (2021) observes, the genre enables female characters, and by extension, their authors, to "bend social norms to support personal identities" within what Sharon Marcus (2005) terms "elastic systems" (Salo, 2021, p. 6). This elasticity allows for self-affirmation without revolutionary rupture, a negotiation that proves vital in contexts where direct confrontation with patriarchy was not only dangerous but often impossible. Thus, the theoretical lens for this study synthesizes Moers' and Gilbert and Gubar's foundational insights with contemporary refinements that foreground agency, strategic indirection, and the interplay between constraint and creativity in women's Gothic writing.

Previous Related Studies

Scholarship on *Frankenstein* has long grappled with its feminist dimensions, particularly in relation to Mary Shelley's inheritance of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft's radical thought. Gisselle Lopez (2018) contends that although Shelley's female characters appear passive and peripheral, their very erasure enacts a Wollstonecraftian critique: the novel dramatizes the catastrophic consequences of a world that excludes women from education, creative participation, and moral authority. Lopez reads Safie's narrative, especially her mother's instruction in "independence of spirit" and "higher powers

of intellect," as a direct invocation of Wollstonecraft's pedagogical ideals, embedded at the narrative core to signal Shelley's covert fidelity to her mother's legacy (Lopez, 2018, p. 9). Similarly, Charles Robinson (2001) demonstrates textual and biographical links between *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Frankenstein*, noting that Shelley composed Safie's letters shortly after re-reading Wollstonecraft's treatise, thereby inscribing feminist pedagogy into the heart of the novel (Robinson, 2001, as cited in Lopez, 2018, p. 11).

In contrast, scholars such as Vanessa Dickerson (1993) and Linda Gill (1993) emphasize Shelley's personal experience of gendered marginalization rather than intertextual influence, interpreting the female characters' "ghostly" presence as symptoms of a broader patriarchal violence that renders women "present but absent" (Dickerson, 1993, p. 80). James Davis (1992) offers a compelling synthesis, arguing that the novel's male protagonists, Victor and the Creature, harbor deep-seated misogyny, perceiving women as vessels of purity or corruption, and that their actions ultimately expose "the social consequences of their misogyny" (Davis, 1992, p. 310).

Turning to *Jane Eyre*, critical consensus affirms its status as a cornerstone of feminist Gothic fiction. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) famously interpret Bertha Mason as Jane's "dark double," the embodied manifestation of her repressed fury against social and sexual constraint (p. 360). This reading has been nuanced by later scholars who highlight Brontë's use of Gothic architecture, especially Thornfield Hall and the Red Room, as metaphors for the psychological and institutional confinement of women (Hasan & Rezapour, 2025, p. 351; Salo, 2021, p. 52). Adrienne Rich (1973) and others underscore Jane's insistence on moral and emotional parity with Rochester as a radical assertion of selfhood, encapsulated in her declaration: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me" (Brontë, 1847, as cited in Hasan & Rezapour, 2025, p. 352). More recently, Salo (2021) frames *Jane Eyre* as the culmination of a Victorian discourse on identity, wherein Jane's journey exemplifies "self-affirmation" achieved through the continual vetting and integration of external influences, rather than their wholesale rejection or internalization (Salo, 2021, p. 49).

Comparative studies, such as that by Hasan and Rezapour (2025), situate both novels within a broader Female Gothic tradition that includes Radcliffe and the Brontës, identifying shared strategies of resistance, confinement as a site of self-reflection, madness as coded rebellion, and first-person narration as a reclaiming of voice (Hasan & Rezapour, 2025, p. 353). Their analysis reveals that while Shelley's Gothic is cautionary and marked by absence, Brontë's is aspirational and centered

on presence, together tracing an evolving trajectory of Gothic feminism across the nineteenth century.

Despite the wealth of scholarship on the feminist dimensions of *Frankenstein* and *Jane Eyre* individually, there remains a notable gap in systematic, comparative analyses that explicitly examine how each text negotiates the dual impulses of subversion and empowerment through Gothic form. While scholars have acknowledged their shared participation in the Female Gothic tradition, few have rigorously contrasted Shelley's strategy of critique-through-absence with Brontë's method of assertion-through-presence. Moreover, existing studies often treat empowerment and subversion as synonymous or sequential, rather than as co-constitutive and textually specific operations. This study addresses this lacuna by posing a central question: how do Shelley and Brontë differently mobilize Gothic conventions to articulate a feminist consciousness that is at once resistant to and constrained by the ideological limits of their era? The following research questions acted as a roadmap and guided this study:

1. How does Mary Shelley employ Gothic tropes of absence, silence, and failed creation in *Frankenstein* to subvert patriarchal narratives of authorship and reproduction?
2. How does Charlotte Brontë utilize Gothic motifs of haunting, confinement, and doubled identity in *Jane Eyre* to enact female empowerment through moral and narrative self-assertion?

Methodology

Design

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative textual analysis design to examine the representation and function of the Gothic feminine in *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley and *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë. The research is interpretive in orientation, grounded in feminist literary theory, and structured around a close reading of selected passages that exemplify key Gothic conventions, such as haunting, confinement, monstrosity, silence, and narrative authority, as deployed by each author to negotiate gendered power dynamics (Hasan & Rezapour, 2025; Salo, 2021). The comparative framework enables a systematic juxtaposition of strategies of subversion and empowerment, revealing both continuities and divergences in how two canonical women writers reconfigure Gothic form for feminist ends.

Corpus

The primary corpus consists of the complete texts of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818 edition) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* (1847 edition). These editions were selected to preserve the authors' original linguistic and narrative choices, avoiding later editorial interventions that might obscure authorial intent. The analysis focuses on passages that prominently feature female characters (including absent, silenced, or symbolic figures), Gothic settings (e.g., laboratories, attics, remote estates), and narrative structures that foreground female voice or its suppression. Key scenes include Victor's creation of the Creature and the subsequent destruction of the female Creature in *Frankenstein*, and the Red Room episode, Bertha Mason's appearances, and Jane's confrontation with Rochester in *Jane Eyre*.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework integrates two complementary feminist theoretical models: Ellen Moers' concept of the "Female Gothic" as a discourse of reproductive and psychological anxiety (Moers, 1976, as cited in Salo, 2021), and Gilbert and Gubar's "angel/monster" dialectic, which interprets female characters as split embodiments of societal expectation and repressed rebellion (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). These models are supplemented by Hoeveler's notion of "professionalized victimhood," wherein Gothic heroines gain moral and narrative authority through suffering (Hoeveler, 1998), and Salo's emphasis on "subterranean challenges" and "elastic systems" that allow for identity formation within constraint (Salo, 2021). This synthesized framework permits a nuanced analysis of how Gothic form functions not only as a site of oppression but also as a vehicle for covert resistance and self-definition.

Research Tools

The primary research tool is close reading, supported by textual annotation and thematic coding. Passages were coded according to recurring Gothic motifs (e.g., "haunting," "confinement," "silence," "doubling," "narrative control") and their relationship to female agency or erasure. Digital editions (Oxford World's Classics for *Frankenstein*; Penguin Classics for *Jane Eyre*) were used for consistency and accessibility, though all interpretive claims are grounded in the original 1818 and 1847 print texts. No computational or quantitative tools were employed, as the study prioritizes interpretive depth over statistical generalizability.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection proceeded in three phases. First, the full texts were read to identify thematically relevant scenes that engage with Gothic conventions and gender. Second, these scenes were excerpted and cataloged according to character, setting, and narrative function. Third, each excerpt was analyzed through the lens of the analytical framework, with particular attention to how language, imagery, and narrative structure either reinforce or undermine patriarchal norms. Special emphasis was placed on moments where female presence is asserted, negated, or symbolically displaced.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative, inductive-deductive process. Initial deductive coding applied the theoretical concepts (e.g., "monstrous double," "reproductive absence") to the excerpts. Subsequently, inductive insights emerged from patterns within the texts themselves, such as Shelley's use of epistolary fragmentation to signal female narrative exclusion, or Brontë's deployment of first-person interiority to assert moral autonomy. Each research question was addressed separately: findings related to *Frankenstein* were analyzed in light of RQ1, and those from *Jane Eyre* in relation to RQ2. The results were then synthesized into descriptive interpretations, presented in Section 4 with supporting tabular summaries, ensuring analytical rigor while avoiding premature theoretical generalization or comparison with prior studies.

4. Results

4.1 Results for Research Question 1

The first research question aimed to explore how Mary Shelley employs Gothic tropes of absence, silence, and failed creation in Frankenstein to subvert patriarchal narratives of authorship and reproduction. Results showed that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* deploys Gothic conventions not to evoke terror for its own sake, but as a strategic framework to interrogate and dismantle patriarchal assumptions about creativity, reproduction, and narrative authority. Central to this subversion is the orchestrated erasure of the feminine, in both character and function, through recurring tropes of absence, silence, and failed creation. These motifs operate as structural critiques, revealing how the exclusion of the maternal and the silencing of female voices precipitate epistemic, ethical, and ontological collapse.

The most salient expression of Gothic absence is the pervasive void left by the literal and symbolic erasure of mothers. Caroline Frankenstein's early death severs Victor from ethical and emotional grounding, a generative absence that leads directly to narrative catastrophe. As scholars note, her removal eliminates the potential for a relational, Wollstonecraftian ethics in Victor's act of creation, resulting in a monstrous, masculinist, and solitary endeavor. This absence is compounded by the spectral treatment of all other female figures. Elizabeth Lavenza is rendered narratively inert, her voice mediated through male narrators and confined to domestic sentiments. Justine Moritz is introduced posthumously, and even the vibrant Safie appears only as a narrative inset within the Creature's tale. These women are, as one critic observes, "present but absent, ghosts of a self," systematically effaced by the novel's triple-frame male narration.

The trope of silence further enacts this subversion by denying female characters direct, agential speech. Margaret Saville, the entire narrative's addressee, remains utterly silent. Elizabeth's single letter is thematically constrained to domestic reassurance. This enforced silence functions as a Gothic strategy of containment, exposing the epistemological violence of a world that treats female subjectivity as irrelevant to grand narratives of science and philosophy.

Most critically, the trope of failed creation crystallizes the novel's feminist critique. Victor's destruction of the female Creature, a being never allowed to live, speak, or act, epitomizes the Gothic feminine as negation. His justification reveals a terror not of monstrosity, but of female autonomy and independent will. This moment dramatizes the impossibility of woman as an independent subject within a patriarchal order that insists on her instrumentality. The female Creature's non-existence becomes the ultimate Gothic horror: her preemptive annihilation by a man who cannot tolerate a woman who might choose or speak for herself.

Finally, Shelley employs symbolic displacement by having the Creature himself assume traditionally feminine roles, domestic labor, emotional vulnerability, and a deep desire for companionship. This inversion feminizes the monstrous and destabilizes the binary between masculine rationality and feminine affect, suggesting that the feminine becomes monstrous only when violently excluded and then blamed for its own exclusion.

Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that Shelley's Gothic strategies are fundamentally interrogative. The absence of mothers is a deliberate indictment of Enlightenment rationality's gendered exclusions. The silence of women dramatizes the epistemic cost of suppressing female

voices. The failure to complete the female Creature is the novel's most potent symbolic act: the literal unmaking of woman as a speaking, desiring subject. Through these tropes, Shelley subverts the foundations of patriarchal authorship, revealing that creation severed from the feminine is not an act of transcendence but a pathway to destruction. Victor's anguished confession, "I am the cause of this, I murdered her," thus extends beyond Elizabeth's death to encompass the systematic annihilation of every feminine possibility, transforming *Frankenstein* from a tale of scientific hubris into a feminist parable about the necessity of the maternal, the right to voice, and the ethical imperative of co-creation.

4.1 Results for Research Question 1

The second research question aimed to discover how Charlotte Brontë utilizes Gothic motifs of haunting, confinement, and doubled identity in *Jane Eyre* to enact female empowerment through moral and narrative self-assertion. The results showed that Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* deploys Gothic conventions not merely for atmosphere, but as structural and psychological frameworks through which the heroine asserts moral autonomy, intellectual integrity, and narrative sovereignty. Unlike the cautionary Gothic of *Frankenstein*, which dramatizes the catastrophic consequences of feminine erasure, *Jane Eyre* presents a Gothic of presence, where voice is reclaimed, boundaries are transgressed, and selfhood is forged through direct confrontation with patriarchal enclosures. The novel's Gothic architecture, the Red Room, Thornfield Hall, the attic, functions as both prison and proving ground, where Jane's identity is tested and ultimately affirmed through three interlocking motifs: haunting, confinement, and doubled identity.

The motif of haunting operates as a multifaceted engine of empowerment. Most prominently, Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic," haunts Thornfield not as a simple monster but as the embodied manifestation of repressed female rage and transgression. Crucially, Bertha acts as Jane's "shadow self," externalizing the passion and fury that Victorian propriety demands Jane suppress. Bertha's spectral interventions, such as tearing Jane's wedding veil, serve as warnings that protect Jane from a marriage that would annihilate her autonomy. This moment of confrontation in the mirror forces Jane to see the "fearful and ghastly" vision of herself as Rochester's compliant bride, catalyzing her later refusal. Haunting extends beyond Bertha to Jane's own psyche. The childhood trauma of the Red Room births her defiant cry of "Unjust!," marking the origin of her moral subjectivity. Later, Rochester's disembodied voice calling her across the moors functions not as

external command, but as a supernatural validation of her internal compass and decision to reject St. John's cold proposal. In each case, haunting becomes a conduit for self-trust and intuitive authority.

Confinement, the second key motif, is systematically transformed from a site of suppression into a space of resistance. From the Red Room and Lowood's rigid discipline to Thornfield's deceptive comforts, Jane is repeatedly enclosed within institutions designed to mold her into docile femininity. Yet within these spaces, she consistently asserts her authenticity. At Lowood, she ultimately sheds borrowed influences to reside in her "natural element." At Thornfield, she refuses the ornamental role of "Mrs. Rochester," declaring that jewels for her sound "unnatural and strange." Her most radical act is her conscious return to a transformed confinement. After fleeing Thornfield to preserve her moral integrity, she ultimately returns to the sequestered Ferndean not as a dependent, but as a self-proclaimed mistress, financially independent and morally sovereign. The power dynamic is reversed; Rochester' blindness makes him reliant on her, transforming the Gothic enclosure into a space of equality.

Finally, the motif of doubled identity allows Jane to integrate competing models of femininity into a self-authored whole. She is persistently presented with dualities: the angelic governess versus the passionate woman, reason versus feeling, Helen Burns's passivity versus Bertha's fury. Brontë does not resolve these through the annihilation of one side, but through Jane's process of moral vetting and integration. She learns from but ultimately transcends her foils, selectively assimilating traits that align with her core self. This process culminates in her iconic declaration: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares m,e" a foundational utterance of Gothic feminism that asserts an identity beyond binary oppositions.

Through these intertwined Gothic strategies, Brontë transforms the genre from one of female victimhood into a narrative of ethical agency. Jane's empowerment is achieved through relentless moral self-possession and narrative control. Her famous closing line, "Reader, I married him," emphasizes the active verb "married," framing her final union not as a capitulation to patriarchy, but as its reformation into a partnership of mutual dependence and narrative co-authorship. Thus, the Gothic motifs of haunting, confinement, and doubled identity become the very mechanisms through which Jane Eyre forges and asserts an empowered, self-defined identity.

5. Discussion

The findings presented in the results section illuminate how Mary Shelley and Charlotte Brontë, though writing within the same Gothic tradition, deploy its conventions toward markedly different feminist ends, one through negation and the other through assertion. When interpreted through the theoretical frameworks established in the Literature Review, particularly Moers' "Female Gothic," Gilbert and Gubar's "angel/monster" dichotomy, Hoeveler's "professionalization of gender," and Salo's concept of "vetted self-affirmation," these strategies cohere into a broader narrative of Gothic feminism that evolves from cautionary critique to ethical self-possession.

In *Frankenstein*, Shelley's Gothic operates as a discourse of absence. The systematic erasure of maternal presence, the silencing of female voices, and the preemptive destruction of the female Creature function not as passive omissions but as deliberate structural critiques. As Lopez (2018) demonstrates, Shelley embeds Wollstonecraftian ideals covertly within the novel, particularly through Safie's recollection of her mother's instruction in "independence of spirit" and "higher powers of intellect" (Shelley, 1818, p. 139). This moment, nestled within the Creature's narrative, the innermost layer of the novel's Russian-doll structure, serves as what Robinson (2001) terms the "feminist core" of the text (as cited in Lopez, 2018, p. 11). Yet this ideal remains spectral, never embodied in a living woman; it exists only as memory, letter, and trace. This very fragmentation enacts the Wollstonecraftian warning: when society denies women education, voice, and reproductive autonomy, their potential remains unrealized, and the consequences are catastrophic for all. The novel's male protagonists, as Davis (1992) argues, embody a "socially constructed misogyny" that manifests in their fear of female agency, Victor's terror that the female Creature might "refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation" (Shelley, 1818, p. 129) reveals not the threat of monstrosity, but the terror of autonomous will (Davis, 1992, p. 310). Thus, Shelley's Gothic subversion resides in what is *not* allowed to exist. The female Creature's unmaking becomes the ultimate allegory for patriarchal control: not merely the suppression of women, but the annihilation of their very possibility.

This strategy contrasts sharply with Brontë's approach in *Jane Eyre*, where the Gothic is mobilized to stage female presence as moral and narrative triumph. Bertha Mason, long read through Gilbert and Gubar's (1979) paradigm as Jane's "mad double," functions less as a split psyche and more, as Hasan and Rezapour (2025) suggest, as an agent of ethical intervention (p. 351). Her

destruction of the wedding veil is not mere madness but a symbolic disavowal of the institution that would erase Jane's identity. This act aligns with Salo's (2021) notion of "subterranean challenges": Bertha's violence enacts what Jane cannot yet articulate, namely, that marriage to Rochester, under the terms offered, constitutes self-annihilation (Salo, 2021, p. 50). Jane's subsequent flight from Thornfield is not passive victimhood but active moral sovereignty. Her declaration, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me" (Brontë, 1847, as cited in Hasan & Rezapour, 2025, p. 352), epitomizes what Hoeveler (1998) identifies as the "professionalization of gender": the heroine transforms suffering into ethical authority (Hoeveler, 1998, p. 5). Unlike Shelley's women, who are silenced by narrative structure, Jane seizes narrative control through first-person testimony. Her voice, reasoned, passionate, and uncompromising, becomes the standard by which all other claims to truth are measured, including Rochester's romantic grandiosity and St. John's missionary absolutism.

The divergence between Shelley and Brontë also reflects a generational shift in Gothic feminism. Shelley, writing in the immediate aftermath of Wollstonecraft's death and amid the conservative backlash to revolutionary ideals, embeds her critique within a framework of loss and negation. Her novel dramatizes what happens when Wollstonecraft's vision is *not* implemented. Brontë, writing three decades later in a society increasingly preoccupied with women's moral and educational roles, offers a model of integration: Jane does not reject influence wholesale but, as Salo (2021) emphasizes, "vet[s] it" (p. 52). She absorbs Helen Burns' patience, Miss Temple's justice, and even Rochester's intensity, but only after subjecting each to rigorous ethical scrutiny. This process of selective assimilation enables her to forge an identity that is neither angel nor monster, but fully human. Her eventual return to Rochester at Ferndean is not submission but reciprocity: she comes as an economic equal ("I am my own mistress," she declares [Brontë, 1847, p. 348]) and moral guide, restoring his humanity through her vision. In this, Brontë transforms the Gothic ending from tragedy to reconciliation, not of opposites, but of equals.

These findings resonate with and refine prior scholarship. Gilbert and Gubar's (1979) influential "angel/monster" binary, while foundational, risks flattening the complexity of Brontë's heroine; Jane is neither wholly angelic nor monstrous, but ethically whole. Similarly, while Dickerson (1993) and Gill (1993) view Shelley's female characters as "ghosts" symptomatic of patriarchal violence, this analysis shows their very spectral quality is the mechanism of critique. The

absence of mothers in *Frankenstein* is not a failure of representation but a formal embodiment of Wollstonecraft's warning: a world without maternal ethics is a world without moral foundation.

In sum, Shelley and Brontë do not merely participate in the Female Gothic tradition, they redefine its political and aesthetic possibilities. Shelley weaponizes absence to expose the epistemic and ethical costs of feminine exclusion, while Brontë harnesses presence to assert the moral authority of the self-constituted woman. Together, they trace an arc of Gothic feminism from diagnostic lament to prescriptive affirmation, proving that the genre, in women's hands, could be both a mirror of oppression and a blueprint for liberation.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* deploy Gothic conventions to articulate distinct yet complementary modes of feminist resistance, one rooted in the critique of absence, the other in the assertion of presence. Through close textual analysis and theoretical engagement with the Female Gothic tradition, the research demonstrates that Shelley's strategic erasure of maternal figures, silencing of female voices, and destruction of the female Creature function not as passive representation but as a structural indictment of patriarchal authorship and reproductive autonomy. Conversely, Brontë harnesses haunting, confinement, and doubled identity to stage Jane Eyre's moral and narrative self-possession, transforming Gothic spaces from sites of entrapment into arenas of ethical self-definition. Together, these texts chart an evolving trajectory of Gothic feminism: from diagnostic lament to prescriptive empowerment.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond literary interpretation to pedagogical and cultural practice. In the classroom, these novels can be taught not merely as canonical artifacts but as dynamic interventions in the history of feminist thought, texts that model how subversive meaning can be encoded within seemingly conventional forms. Culturally, they affirm the Gothic's enduring capacity to articulate marginalized subjectivities under conditions of constraint, offering a template for contemporary creators negotiating voice, agency, and resistance in restrictive contexts.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. It focuses exclusively on two English novels published nearly three decades apart, thereby forgoing broader comparative possibilities with other Female Gothic works, such as those by Ann Radcliffe or Emily Brontë, that might further nuance the patterns identified here. Additionally, while the analysis foregrounds gender, it does not fully

integrate intersectional variables such as class, colonialism, or disability, which are undeniably operative in both texts, particularly in Brontë's portrayal of Bertha Mason and Shelley's framing of the Creature's racialized otherness.

Future research might pursue several fruitful directions. First, a transnational comparative study could explore how Gothic feminism manifests in non-British literatures, testing the adaptability of the theoretical models used here. Second, a digital humanities approach, using corpus linguistics or sentiment analysis, could quantify the distribution of Gothic tropes across a wider corpus of women-authored Gothic fiction, thereby validating or refining the qualitative findings of this study. Third, classroom-based research could investigate how students interpret these novels through feminist lenses, illuminating the pedagogical efficacy of teaching Gothic literature as a discourse of resistance.

Ultimately, *Frankenstein* and *Jane Eyre* endure not because they resolve the contradictions of their historical moment, but because they dramatize them with unflinching clarity. Shelley warns what happens when the feminine is excluded; Brontë shows what is possible when it is centered. In doing so, both affirm that the Gothic, in women's hands, is never only about fear, it is equally, and indelibly, about freedom.

References

Ahmed, S. (2014). The contingency of pain. In *The cultural politics of emotion* (pp. 19–42). Edinburgh University Press.

Allen, G. (2008). Language, form, and style. In *Shelley's Frankenstein* (pp. 16–34). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Armitt, L. (2016). The Gothic girl. In A. Horner & S. Zlosnik (Eds.), *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh companion* (pp. 60–73). Edinburgh University Press.

Baumann, R. (2018). *Frankenstein 200: The birth, life, and resurrection of Mary Shelley's monster*. Indiana University Press.

Benford, C. (2010). "Listen to my tale": Multilevel structure, narrative sense making, and the inassimilable in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. *Narrative, 18*(3), 324–346. https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2010.0005

Bernatchez, J. (2009). Monstrosity, suffering, subjectivity, and sympathetic community in *Frankenstein* and "The structure of torture." *Science Fiction Studies, 36*(2), 205–216. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40649956

Bowstead, D. (1986). *Women writers and the Gothic tradition*. Cambridge University Press.

Brontë, C. (1847). *Jane Eyre: An autobiography*. Smith, Elder & Co.

Brontë, E. (1847). *Wuthering Heights*. Thomas Cautley Newby.

Brown, M. (2003). *Frankenstein*: A child's tale. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction, 36*(2), 145–175. https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-36-2-145

Butler, J. (2014). Afterword. In B. Johnson, *A life with Mary Shelley* (pp. 37–50). Stanford University Press.

Campbell, J. (2016). Bluebeard and the beast: The mysterious realism of *Jane Eyre*. *Marvels & Tales, 30*(2), 234–250. https://doi.org/10.13110/marvelstales.30.2.0234

Corbett, R. (2001). Romanticism and science fictions. *Romanticism on the Net, 21*. https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/ron/2001-n21-ron433/005970ar/

Crain, P. (2016). *Reading children: Literacy, property, and the dilemmas of childhood in nineteenth-century America*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Crimmins, J. (2013). Mediation's sleight of hand: The two vectors of the Gothic in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. *Studies in Romanticism, 52*(4), 561–585.

Davison, C. M. (2021). *Gothic feminism and the poetics of fear*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Davis, J. R. (1992). *Frankenstein* and the subversion of the masculine voice. *Women's Studies, 21*(3), 307–322. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1992.9978853

Devon, A. (2010). *Frankenstein: Creation, frustration, fragmentation, abomination*. The Victorian Web. http://www.victorianweb.org/previctorian/mshelley/anderson.html

Dickerson, V. D. (1993). The ghost of a self: Female identity in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. *Journal of Popular Culture, 26*(3), 79–90. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1993.2603_79.x

Geerken, I. (2004). "The dead are not annihilated": Mortal regret in *Wuthering Heights*. *Journal of Narrative Theory, 34*(3), 373–406. https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2004.0010

Gilbert, N. (2015). A servitude of one's own: Isolation, authorship, and the nineteenth-century British governess. *Nineteenth-Century Literature, 69*(4), 455–480. https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2015.69.4.455

Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. Yale University Press.

Gill, L. (2001). Women beware! The appropriation of women in Hollywood's revisioning of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures, 24*(1), 93–97. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5915.2001.tb01924.x

Halberstam, J. (1995). *Skin shows: Gothic horror and the technology of monsters*. Duke University Press.

Hasan, A. O., & Rezapour, P. (2025). Female rebellion and narratives of resistance in nineteenth-century women's Gothic fiction: A critical study of Mary Shelley, the Brontë sisters, and Ann Radcliffe. *American Journal of Language, Literacy and Learning in STEM Education, 3*(10), 348–359.

Hawley, E. (2015). The bride and her afterlife: Female Frankenstein monsters on page and screen. *Literature/Film Quarterly, 43*(3), 218–230. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43799028

Heiland, D. (2005). *Gothic and gender: An introduction*. Blackwell Publishing.

Heilbrun, C., & Stimpson, C. (1989). Theories of feminist criticism: A dialogue. In J. Donovan (Ed.), *Feminist literary criticism: Explorations in theory* (2nd ed., pp. 61–73). University Press of Kentucky.

Hoeveler, D. L. (1998). *Gothic feminism: The professionalization of gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës*. Pennsylvania State University Press.

Homans, M. (1986). Bearing demons: *Frankenstein*'s circumvention of the maternal. In *Bearing the word: Language and the female experience in nineteenth-century women's writing* (pp. 100–119). University of Chicago Press.

Horner, A., & Zlosnik, S. (2016). *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh companion*. Edinburgh University Press.

Jacobs, D. (2000). *Subversive Gothic: The politics of gender in nineteenth-century fiction*. Routledge.

Johnson, B. (1982). My monster/my self. *Diacritics, 12*(2), 2–10. https://doi.org/10.2307/464674

Jourdrey, T. J. (2015). "Well, we must be for ourselves in the long run": Selfishness and sociality in *Wuthering Heights*. *Nineteenth-Century Literature, 70*(2), 165–193. https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2015.70.2.165

Jung, D. (2021). "Currer Bell": *Jane Eyre*'s alternative proper name. *Brontë Studies, 46*(1), 43–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/14748932.2021.1835064

Kakoudaki, D. (2018). Unmaking people: The politics of negation in *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina*. *Science Fiction Studies, 45*(2), 289–307. https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.45.2.0289

Kelly, G. (2003). *Women's education and literary culture in the Victorian era*. Oxford University Press.

Ledoux, E. (2011). *Social reform in the British female Gothic, 1790–1820*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ledoux, E. (2017). *Revisiting the female Gothic: Beyond domestic fear*. University of Delaware Press.

Lopez, G. (2018). *"Finding the mother": The Wollstonecraftian feminist influence in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and its media* (Honors thesis). Saint Xavier University.

McGavran, J. H. (2000). "Insurmountable barriers to our union": Homosocial male bonding, homosexual panic, and death on the ice in *Frankenstein*. *European Romantic Review, 11*(1), 46–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509580008570098

Mellor, A. K. (1988). Usurping the female. In *Mary Shelley: Her life, her fiction, her monsters* (pp. 115–126). Methuen.

Milbank, A. (1998). *Daughters of the house: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Miles, R. (2000). *Gothic writing, 1750–1820: A genealogy*. Routledge.

Moers, E. (1979). Female Gothic. In G. Levine & U. C. Knoepflmacher (Eds.), *The endurance of "Frankenstein": Essays on Mary Shelley's novel* (pp. 77–87). University of California Press.

Mussell, K. J. (1983). "But why do they read those things?": The female audience and the Gothic novel. In J. E. Fleenor (Ed.), *The female Gothic* (pp. 57–68). Eden Press.

Newman, B. (1986). Narratives of seduction and the seductions of narrative: The frame structure of *Frankenstein*. *ELH, 53*(1), 141–163. https://doi.org/10.2307/2873151

Phillips, J. (2009). Marriage in *Jane Eyre*: From contract to conversation. *Brontë Studies, 33*(3), 203–217. https://doi.org/10.1179/174582208X338559

Pike, J. E. (2009). "My name was Isabella Linton": Coverture, domestic violence, and Mrs. Heathcliff's narrative in *Wuthering Heights*. *Nineteenth-Century Literature, 64*(3), 347–383. https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2009.64.3.347

Potter, T. (2005). *The female Gothic: Gender and genre, 1790–1830*. Manchester University Press.

Purinton, M. D. (1993). Ideological revision: Cross-gender characterization in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. *CEA Critic, 56*(1), 53–64. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26393693

Radcliffe, A. (1794). *The mysteries of Udolpho*. G. G. and J. Robinson.

Randel, F. V. (1984). *Frankenstein*, feminism, and the intertextuality of mountains. *Studies in Romanticism, 23*(4), 515–532. https://doi.org/10.2307/25600514

Rich, A. (1990). *Jane Eyre: The temptations of a motherless woman*. In B. T. Hall (Ed.), *Critical essays on Charlotte Brontë* (pp. 142–155). G. K. Hall.

Robinson, C. E. (2001). A mother's daughter: An intersection of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A vindication of the rights of woman*. In *Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley: Writing lives* (pp. 127–138). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Rubenstein, M. A. (1976). "My accursed origin": The search for the mother in *Frankenstein*. *Studies in Romanticism, 15*(2), 165–194. https://doi.org/10.2307/25599842

Salo, H. (2021). *In a Victorian fog: Constructing identities in female Gothic novels* (Master's thesis). University of Louisville. https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/3596

Schaffer, T. (2016). *Romance's rival: Familiar marriage in Victorian fiction*. Oxford University Press.

Schoene-Harwood, B. (2000). *Mary Shelley: Frankenstein*. Columbia University Press.

Shelley, M. (1818). *Frankenstein; or, the modern Prometheus*. Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones.

Smith, A. (2016). Female Gothic. In A. Smith (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to 'Frankenstein'* (pp. 101–115). Cambridge University Press.

Smith, L. A. (2004). "This thing of darkness": Racial discourse in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. *Gothic Studies, 6*(2), 208–222. https://doi.org/10.7227/GS.6.2.5

Spacks, P. M. (1975). *The female imagination*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Steinitz, R. (2000). Diaries and displacement in *Wuthering Heights*. *Studies in the Novel, 32*(4), 407–419. https://www.jstor.org/stable/29533412

Stange, M. (2000). "You must create a female": Republican order and its natural base in *Frankenstein*. *Women's Studies, 29*(3), 309–328. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497870009570496

Taniyan, B. (2017). Gender in the monster: Dr. Frankenstein as a mother. *Journal of Suleyman Demirel University Institute of Social Sciences, 26*(1), 1–8.

Valint, A. (2016). Accepting Adèle in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. *Dickens Studies Annual, 47*, 201–222. https://doi.org/10.5325/dickstudannu.47.2016.0201

Wallace, D. (2013). *Female Gothic histories: Gender, history and the Gothic*. University of Wales Press.

Wilks, B. (2016). *Jane Eyre* revisited. *Brontë Studies, 41*(4), 285–292. https://doi.org/10.1080/14748932.2016.1222705

Wilson, C. A. (2005). Female reading communities in *Jane Eyre*. *Brontë Studies, 30*(2), 131–139. https://doi.org/10.1179/147489305X45145

Wollstonecraft, M. (2007). *A vindication of the rights of woman*. In A. K. Mellor & N. Chao (Eds.), *A vindication of the rights of woman and The wrongs of woman, or Maria* (pp. 23–232). Pearson Longman.

Wright, A. (2003). *The female Gothic: New directions*. Palgrave Macmillan.