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NINETEENTH-CENTURY GOTHIC LITERATURE

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Set of documents

Document A

I hesitated long before I put this theory to the test of practice. I knew well that I risked death; for any drug that so potently controlled and shook the very fortress of identity, might by the least scruple of an overdose or at the least inopportunity in the moment of exhibition, utterly blot out that immaterial tabernacle which I looked to it to change. But the temptation of a discovery so singular and profound, at last overcame the suggestions of alarm. I had long since prepared my tincture; I purchased at once, from a firm of wholesale chemists, a large quantity of a particular salt which I knew, from my experiments, to be the last ingredient required; and late one accursed night, I compounded the elements, watched them boil and smoke together in the glass, and when the ebullition had subsided, with a strong glow of courage, drank off the potion.

The most racking pangs succeeded: a grinding in the bones, deadly nausea, and a horror of the spirit that cannot be exceeded at the hour of birth or death. Then these agonies began swiftly to subside, and I came to myself as if out of a great sickness. There was something strange in my sensations, something indescribably new and, from its very novelty, incredibly sweet. I felt younger, lighter, happier in body; within I was conscious of a heady recklessness, a current of disordered sensual images running like a mill-race in my fancy, a solution of the bonds of obligation, an unknown but not an innocent freedom of the soul. I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil; and the thought, in that moment, braced and delighted me like wine. I stretched out my hands, exulting in the freshness of these sensations; and in the act, I was suddenly aware that I had lost in stature.

There was no mirror, at that date, in my room; that which stands beside me as I write, was brought there later on and for the very purpose of these transformations. The night, however, was far gone into the morning — the morning, black as it was, was nearly ripe for the conception of the day — the inmates of my house were locked in the most rigorous hours of slumber; and I determined, flushed as I was with hope and triumph, to venture in my new shape as far as to my bedroom. I crossed the yard, wherein the constellations looked down upon me, I could have thought, with wonder, the first creature of that sort that their unsleeping vigilance had yet disclosed to them; I stole through the corridors, a stranger in my own house; and coming to my room, I saw for the first time the appearance of Edward Hyde.

I must here speak by theory alone, saying not that which I know, but that which I suppose to be most probable. The evil side of my nature, to which I had now transferred the stamping efficacy, was less robust and less developed than the good which I had just deposed. Again, in the course of my life, which had been, after all, nine-tenths a life of effort, virtue, and control, it had been much less exercised and much less exhausted. And hence, as I think, it came about that Edward Hyde was so much smaller, slighter, and younger than Henry Jekyll. Even as good shone upon the countenance of the one, evil was written broadly and plainly on the face of the other. Evil besides (which I must still believe to be the lethal side of man) had left on that body an imprint of deformity and decay. And yet when I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself. It seemed natural and human. In my eyes it bore a livelier image of the spirit, it seemed more express and single, than the imperfect and divided countenance I had been hitherto accustomed to call mine. And in so far I was doubtless right. I have observed that when I wore the semblance of Edward Hyde, none could come near to me at first without a visible misgiving of the flesh. This, as I take it, was because all human beings, as we meet them, are commingled out of good and evil: and Edward Hyde, alone in the ranks of mankind, was pure evil.

Robert Louis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde*, 1886

Document B

It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one
5 in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate
10 the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! -- Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed
15 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 straight black lips.

The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole
20 purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, continued a
25 long time traversing my bed chamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep. At length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured; and I threw myself on the bed in my clothes, endeavouring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness. But it was in vain: I slept, indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom
30 of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I
35 started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed: when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch -- the miserable monster whom I had created. He held

40 up the curtain of the bed and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were
fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds,
while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear;
one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and
rushed down stairs. I took refuge in the courtyard belonging to the house
which I inhabited; where I remained during the rest of the night, walking
45 up and down in the greatest agitation, listening attentively, catching and
fearing each sound as if it were to announce the approach of the
demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life.

Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A
mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that
50 wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished he was ugly then; but when
those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a
thing such as even Dante could not have conceived.

I passed the night wretchedly. Sometimes my pulse beat so quickly
and hardly that I felt the palpitation of every artery; at others, I nearly sank
55 to the ground through languor and extreme weakness. Mingled with this
horror, I felt the bitterness of disappointment; dreams that had been my
food and pleasant rest for so long a space were now become a hell to me;
and the change was so rapid, the overthrow so complete!

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1818

A few words on the method for the *composition*

The set of documents under study is one I have worked on in class with my MEEF students; despite the two texts being taken from classic novels of English literature whom every candidate to the Capes must or should have read, one main difficulty for the pupils was often to beware of preconceived ideas, and easy mistakes about the main protagonists of the stories and the long-established universality of the tales (one such mistake being to call the creature in Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*! This can no longer be excused...). Besides, the obvious Gothic tropes – which of course need studying – should not be the only prism through which to consider the texts, as this would lead to merely descriptive, tedious analyses: students indeed tend to disregard or ignore the intricate

attraction-repulsion mechanisms at work in these novels, as well as the way they are given textual substance. In most of the papers written about this dossier, emphasis was often laid on psychological aspects only, thus preventing any consideration of the stylistic and linguistic tools used by the authors; this corresponds to a tendency teachers too often observe, that of favouring content over form. I find it to be a recurring mistake even among MEEF students, who should be advised to take time and pore over the linguistic reality of a text, and not lose time lamenting over the hero's demise as they would a dear friend's!

Last but not least, even though the candidates must focus on the extracts given only, it is often necessary and appreciated to refer to further plot developments of the novels, provided the books have been read. This allows for a richer, more comprehensive consideration of the issues or themes tackled in the passages, and is coherent with the synthetic nature of the *composition* exam.

The following analysis is therefore an example of how the two extracts can be studied. Among the notions and themes on the syllabus for the 2020 session of the Capes, I naturally chose *Innovations scientifiques et responsabilité*, which is quite similar to *L'idée de progrès* in the 2019 session. Students should also be reminded to carefully work on the links between the notion they have chosen as structural backbone to their work and their *problématique*, and to make sure that their analysis constantly refers to it.

NB: Headings and subheadings have been specified here for the sake of clarity, but must not be used in a fully-written commentary.

ANALYSIS

Introduction

In the waning days of the Enlightenment, the Gothic developed as the recognition that rationalism is not the only or best means of considering Man, while trying to combine the rational and the irrational in the reflection upon the complexities of human nature. Then, throughout the Victorian era, as progress in science was expanding, so did the confidence in human abilities, since Man was deemed able, of his own free will, to do virtually anything; this made him challenge God and question the divine prerogative to create or control life. This tension between great, often

supernatural forces modifying human existence and the strict codes imposed by morality – especially in Puritan England – is a core element of the novels concerned in this set of documents.

Robert Louis Stevenson was deeply interested in the new discoveries of scientific psychology as he had become familiar with the works of French neuropsychologists such as Charcot and Bernheim. Throughout his novel *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the Gothic double evolves from a harbinger of doom into an element of individual psychology, and becomes the demon who dwells inside us, externally conforming to culture, yet internally craving for freedom. Indeed, in document A, which corresponds to Henry Jekyll's account of his experiment and his first confrontation with Edward Hyde, the doctor describes his frightening, yet fascinating transformation into his evil *Doppelgänger*, a process that leads him to ponder on Man's inherently dual nature.

Document B is taken from Mary Shelley's famous novel *Frankenstein*, which was published in 1818, at a time when artists, philosophers, or scientists, were eager to go beyond the boundaries of knowledge and discover the unknown through new fields of research. Shelley's Gothic story can thus easily be considered as the first science-fiction novel ever written, as the author reflects upon Man's desire to transgress the laws of Nature and the limits of science, but also as a 'cautionary tale', due to the catastrophic results of the enterprise. This particular extract corresponds to Victor Frankenstein's creation of the 'monster' and his horrified reaction to it, as it becomes an experience of "breathless horror and disgust", leaving the scientist unable to embrace his "hideous progeny" (an expression that Shelley herself used to refer to her novel).

Both texts interestingly rely on the invasive use of a first person narrator, which invites the reader to question the reliability and moral accountability of two ambitious, self-confident protagonists who present their creations as revolutionary acts meant to improve Man and defeat Death itself. But as the experiments come to their terrifying conclusions, both Jekyll and Frankenstein have to come to terms with the dark, monstrous part of themselves that has been exposed in the process, which sheds light on the ambivalence and dangers of Science when used to satisfy one's own, often twisted desires.

Through the framework of *Innovations scientifiques et responsabilité*, this analysis will thus try to show how the novelists tackle the notions of scientific progress and the creation of life in order to reveal Man's darker side and evil nature. After analysing the Gothic treatment of

two stories that pit scientific experiments and dark, mysterious forces, we shall consider the process of creation as being ultimately one of self-destruction, which will lead us to a deeper reflection on Man's morally ambivalent stance towards progress.

1) Two typically Gothic texts: scientific progress and groundbreaking experiments as a confrontation with the frightening Other

a. Frightful settings and atmospheres: These extracts describe two nightly scenes set upon a gloomy background of rain and storm ("one accursed night" l.10, doc A, "a dreary night of November" l.1, "the rain pattered dismally against the panes" l.15, doc B); they both take place in the scientists' laboratories, so in isolated, confined spaces; this immediately establishes the sense of claustrophobia and entrapment so characteristic of Gothic literature, as exemplified by Jekyll's references to the locked doors and corridors of his house, which evokes the moral restraints imposed by the Victorian society of the time. The frightful dimension of the place is further emphasised by the use of a hyperbolic language that conveys an impression of excess, and of something uncontrollable: what the narrators feel is "an anxiety that almost amounted to agony" ll.2-3, "the greatest agitation" l.46 in doc B, "deadly nausea, and a horror of the spirit" ll.14-15, as they behold "an imprint of deformity and decay" ll.50-51 in doc A. Besides, night is the time when the boundaries between the rational and the irrational worlds are blurred, and the propitious moment for supernatural manifestations to occur as shown through the theme of the frightening Other, a recurring Gothic trope ("the face of the other" l.49, doc A, "the demoniacal corpse" l.47, doc B). This confrontation is actually evoked through a number of contrasting patterns and motifs.

b. Light or darkness: a symbolical dichotomy: Significantly, the two texts contain many references to the contrast between light and darkness, establishing a sort of literary *chiaroscuro*; "my candle was nearly burnt out" (l.6, document B) suggests a progressive dying of the light, and thus the potential threat that the whole enterprise might represent for the scientist; semi-darkness seems to prevail ("the glimmer of the half-extinguished light" ll.6-7, doc B) even at dawn ("the morning, black as it was" l.31, doc A); perception and discernment are thus impeded and

confused, but this is also a more metaphorical or psychological darkness as the scientists have to face uncertainty and anxiety before the experiments are carried out; the two extracts therefore take place at a moment of transition between night and day, signifying a turning-point in the protagonists' lives but also creating a sense of imbalance and in-between-ness, which is destabilising for both the characters and the readers; this is expressed through almost oxymoronic expressions: "There was something strange in my sensations, something indescribably new", "a current of disordered sensual images" (ll.17-18, l.21, doc A).

c. Science versus the Uncanny: Indeed, though the insistence is on a rational, scientific approach (hence the detailed description of the the potion concocted by Jekyll in document A), the texts also evoke the unleashing of mysterious, terrifying forces that collide with the rational mind: Jekyll for example uses the expression "immaterial tabernacle" (l. 5), which contrasts with precise references to chemical salts or ebullition, thus comparing the scientific process to a sacred, religious experience – or rather an act of profanation, an aspect we will develop later. Besides, for the two scientists, this is a moment of both excitement – the sense of triumph is clearly expressed ("flushed as I was with hope and triumph" ll.33-34, doc A, "I beheld the accomplishment of my toils" l.2, doc B) – and dread or repulsion; we can thus associate these texts with the aesthetic concept of the Sublime as defined by Edmund Burke, since the two characters experience a sense of awe in front of their creations; this is most obvious with Jekyll, as one can notice through the many comparative forms used in the extract ("Edward Hyde was so much smaller, slighter and younger than Henry Jekyll", "more express and single" ll.46-47, l.54), a means to reflect the doctor's growing elation as the experiment is being conducted. Frankenstein on the contrary grows weaker and seems progressively deprived of his initial strength and resolution ("I nearly sank to the ground through languor and extreme weakness" ll.55-56); he describes himself as incapable of any reaction (the word "unable" is repeated twice ll. 23-25). Finally, the semantic field of terror and revulsion is a characteristic feature of the texts, along with the contrast between beauty and ugliness, which becomes a structuring device: Shelley's text for instance abounds with disturbing associations between purity ("his teeth of a pearly whiteness" l. 14) and the horror that the uncanny creature inspires ("the dun white sockets", "his shrivelled complexion" ll.16-17).

This will thus lead us to consider another central aspect of the documents, which both revolve around the literary figure of the monster

as a product of Man's ambition and pride, thereby questioning the links between creation and destruction.

II) The birth of a monster: from creation to (self-) destruction

a. Creating life from death: an abomination: The analogy with the process of gestation and birth is manifest in the two extracts ("the first breath of this new life" l.23 doc A), suggesting a moment that is both excruciating and pleasant ("exulting in the freshness of these sensations" l.26, "these agonies" l.16, doc A, "my teeth chattered and every limb became convulsed" ll.36-37, doc B); but the dominant theme is that of monstrosity, which reminds us of the literary tradition of the monster as Man-made; in the two extracts, the experiment is presented as both an innovation and an atrocity: every physical aspect of the new being is exaggerated as though through a magnifying glass, offering a distorted and grotesque vision : Frankenstein's creature is "a mummy again endued with animation" (l.50), while Mr Hyde bears "an imprint of deformity and decay" (ll. 50-51); besides the nightmarish quality of the extracts, thanks to their highly visual quality, is clearly evocative of Fuseli's famous painting, conjuring up a series of terrifying images in the reader's mind. In the extract from Shelley's novel, Frankenstein has a nightmare about his fiancée, in which *Eros* and *Thanatos* are forever linked, the lovers' embrace becoming a ghastly *danse macabre* ("livid with the hue of death" l. 32, "a shroud enveloped her form" l. 34); this is of course a proleptic element in the story since Elizabeth will eventually be killed by the creature on the couple's wedding night.

b. Defying the laws of Nature: Another recurring aspect of the extracts is indeed the morbid fascination with the cycle of life and death, as shown by the many macabre elements referred to in document B ("the corpse of my dead mother" l.33, "grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel" l.34), as well as Frankenstein's use of parts of dead bodies to create a new living entity; more precisely the disrupting force of death is viewed as a second birth that goes against the natural cycle of life: Frankenstein's creature is a new, though monstrous, being brought into the world, while Jekyll's drinking of the potion feels like a near-death experience ("these agonies" l.16). In fact the doctor's concoction of the mixture corresponds to an act of transgression and profanation; this introduces the theme of playing God, since the scientist (like a demiurge)

intends to undo or toy with the laws of Nature; the experiment therefore produces a truly unnatural creation: in Shelley's novel, very few details are actually given about the scientific process itself, thus leaving much room to the reader's imagination, while implying that the whole procedure may owe more to some kind of black magic or to irrational forces than to purely scientific methods ("that I might infuse a spark of being" l.1.3-4; here the word "spark" might be referring as well to electricity – a recent discovery at the time – as to a spell cast by the scientist-sorcerer). Interestingly, the author subtitled her novel *The Modern Prometheus*, therefore insisting on the complex, ambivalent links between myth or magic, and science.

c. Hubris and the pitfalls of Man's ambition: Actually, just like in Greek tragedies, both Jekyll and Frankenstein are presented as victims of their own pride or *hubris*, because of their ambition to achieve something never accomplished by man before ("a discovery so singular and profound" l.6, doc A, "an ardour that far exceeded moderation" l. 21, doc B); the result is merely precipitating the hero's demise or downfall; this tragic aspect is one that Mary Shelley particularly insists on, the romantic – and potentially destructive – force that inhabits her protagonists being a characteristic of the novel; in Stevenson's story instead, romantic impulses have become self-destroying habits, announcing the late nineteenth-century decadence, as Jekyll is confronted to societal and moral codes that turn his long-repressed passions into an all-engulfing force ("sold a slave to my original evil" l.24). In both texts though, the main protagonist is viewed as an outcast, isolated, doomed and bound to flee: the theme of wandering is suggested through the two protagonists' physical agitation and inner turmoil (Jekyll describes himself as "a stranger in my own house" l.38, and Frankenstein is "unable to compose my mind to sleep" ll.25-26), along with a sense of imminent death and "catastrophe" (a term often used in *Frankenstein*).

As the two experiments progressively reveal Man's tendency to destroy himself, the texts thus ponder on the ambiguous relation with scientific progress, which is the aspect we will now focus on in our analysis.

III) Exposing Man's duality and questioning the moral limits of progress

a. Moral ambivalence and the limits of Man's control: One central motif in these novels is the opposition between Good and Evil; the propensity for evil is actually presented as inherent in human nature, which leads the authors to a deeper reflection on Man's guilt, as felt by Frankenstein ("the demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life" ll.47-48, doc B); another leitmotiv is the opposition between body and soul (or liberation versus entrapment), as expressed for example by Jekyll with the analogy between his mortal coil and a "prison-house" later in the novel. Images of corruption and decay therefore prevail, as well as perversion, through implicit allusions to the Original Sin: in document B, the reference to Dante reinforces the religious or biblical imagery woven by Shelley in her novel while the word "Evil" is used many times by Jekyll in his account of the experiment; yet one may notice an obvious opposition between Frankenstein who rejects and runs away from his creation, and Jekyll who is fascinated and seems to embrace it willingly: indeed, instead of fleeing from the room out of despair, the latter rushes towards a mirror to contemplate "with wonder" his new, monstrous self: "I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome" (ll.51-52).

b. Confronting oneself or the Double as a reflection of one's inner monstrosity: In fact, the texts are very much about creating or revealing a new self and a new identity, or rather Man's multiple identities. First of all, there is a significant contrast between document A, in which the name of Edward Hyde – Jekyll's monstrous *alter ego* – is explicitly mentioned, and document B with a creature that is never given a proper name, and whose identity is thus bound to fluctuate. The theme of the double is also emphasised through that of metamorphosis: the moment of creation is definitely a time for revelation, exposing the dark side of Man. The concept of a fragmented or split personality – anticipating on Freud's theories about the subconscious – is thus brought to the fore: identity is presented as something elusive (hence the constant shift between the pronouns *it* and *he* in document B), an impression reinforced by the symbol of the mirror, which, like identity, can easily be shattered ("shook the very fortress of identity" l.3, doc A); in Shelley's text, it is the creature's eyes that function as a mirror to his creator, enabling Frankenstein to contemplate his repulsive, terrifying reflection ("his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me" l.40, "I had gazed on him" l.51); besides, the narrator symptomatically uses the same word to describe both himself and the monster ("I beheld the wretch" l.38, "I passed the night wretchedly" l.54), therefore insisting on the ambivalent links between the scientist and his creature, and on the idea that progress and scientific experimentation

actually lead to our terrifying, irremediable regression into a savage and destructive mode of existence.

c. Trying to write about the unnameable: These limits of progress and of man's control over Nature represent a conflict or ordeal also expressed through the narrators' confrontation with language, which sounds fragmented, confused and hesitant ("how can I describe my emotions" l.9, doc B); though the acquisition and command of language are commonly considered as the prerogative of the civilised and a sign of progress, confronting one's abominable creation is an experience that truly defies language, since the result of the experiment is presented as impossible to express with words; the new being is symptomatically called "the thing", "the wretch" in doc B, "the thing", "the other" in doc A, but also an "ugly idol" l.51: this oxymoronic expression further reveals the dichotomy and conflict within the creator or writer, who is torn between reverence and rejection. Another main aspect of these texts – and novels – is having to deal with the emotions of unreliable narrators, whose extreme sensibility and reactions raise the question of this heightened awareness being a trap for readers, who could easily be deceived and empathise with the creator instead of the creature, an ambiguity on which Shelley's whole novel actually functions. Similarly, Jekyll's morally questionable attraction to the darker side of human nature serves to draw attention to the ambiguous, corrupting power of words, whose effects could then be compared to those of the very experiments they describe.

Conclusion: These two texts therefore show highly ambivalent reactions to progress and scientific innovation. In both, the scientist and creator of a new being passes, as Stevenson's narrator relates, from innocence ("the innocent freedom of the soul" l.22) to crime and corruption (thus becoming "tenfold more wicked" ll.23-24). However, Jekyll's original intention was to find a means to express morally repressible impulses in him, an ambiguity acknowledged by the protagonist throughout the novel. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein instead views himself as the victim of forces he has "miserably" let loose, thus rejecting any moral accountability onto the creature itself, as the tragic evolution of the plot shows.

Through fragmented narrations that mirror the monstrosities they present and seem to refuse to tell their stories from one reliable point of view, both Shelley and Stevenson express the confusion of what to believe and the possibility of erring fatally. Through a highly hyperbolic language, they demonstrate how these acts of linguistic repetition function as

monstrosities themselves, replicating the birthing of the scientists' evil, duplicated selves. They finally question the very purpose of scientific discovery, which is here presented as a form of nightmarish regression to primal, animal instincts in Man that always threaten to resurface and are legitimised for the sake of progress. This tension between rejection of and identification with the Monster/monstrous was actually expressed by Stevenson himself when talking about the genesis and writing of his novel: "Man is not truly one, but truly two."

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