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Practice exam question

Hostile takeovers

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Guidance for the question on p. 41 of the magazine.

The end of an answer

As we have seen in the above examples, *Dracula* expresses a fear of moral values and norms being disrupted, but it does more than this. At the same time, through its subtext, it paradoxically expresses a desire to disrupt or transgress moral values and norms. This is suggested in moments such as when Lucy writes to Mina and jokingly asks, 'Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?' Freud's idea that 'a joke is the disguised satisfaction of a repressed instinct' comes to mind, as perhaps rather than gently mocking late Victorian moral strictness, the emotionally open and flirtatious Lucy might be unconsciously voicing her sexual desires. This is in keeping with her later behaviour when, as a vampire, she uses a performative, aggressive sexuality to tempt Arthur. A similar paradoxical treatment of sexual values and norms can be seen when Jonathan is tempted by the vampire women after he falls asleep in a forbidden room in Dracula's castle. Stoker's language suggests a battle between repression and desire as Jonathan writes of his response to the 'deliberate voluptuousness of the vampire woman', which he found 'both thrilling and repulsive'. He seems to abandon the traditional active male role and instead surrender himself to the vampire's desire, as he notes, 'I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited — waited with beating heart'. Thus, desire overrides his adherence to Victorian morality, and it seems as though he is about to give himself up to sensual pleasure when Dracula enters and calls the women away. Both instances show not only a fear of morality being disrupted but also a desire for that disruption. Perhaps in this way Stoker expresses unease at the sexual double standard in late-Victorian society, where everyone was expected to adhere to strict sexual morality through criminal law and religious authority, yet where significant numbers of outwardly respectable middle- and upper-class men kept mistresses or visited prostitutes.

Frankenstein also depicts a world in which moral values and norms are disrupted, but its disruptions are less disparate than those of *Dracula*. While readers and critics of *Dracula* see moral disruption on many levels — from the supernatural unsettling religious and spiritual norms, to the power of Catholicism challenging the values of the Church of England or Church of Ireland, and to the moral values of Great Britain being threatened by foreigners, to name just a few — Shelley's morality operates in a more focused manner. The overt threat of unregulated science usurping the norms of religion is, arguably, only a plot device and a means of provoking fear in the reader. More important is the disruption of moral values and norms that occurs when people or societies believe that some individuals have more intrinsic worth than others, and that it is right to judge people on the basis of appearance or birth. This is what is truly monstrous in the novel, and the ultimate moral of the text is one that Mary Shelley would have been familiar with through the writings of her radical philosopher father, William Godwin, in works such as *Political Justice* (1793), which is named in the novel's dedication. Godwin argues that crime and moral failings spring less from inherent evil than from the

consequences of poor reasoning, and he asserts that social improvement comes from the cultivation of knowledge and the avoidance of prejudice. Thus, rather than reading the novel solely as a work of Gothic sensationalism, we should view the Creature as an allegorical figure representing the poor and the downtrodden. Similarly, rather than being sympathetic to the overreaching scientist, we should view Victor as representing the rich and privileged, who have a responsibility to the poor but instead exploit them.

In exploring fears over moral values and norms being disrupted, both texts use horror, terror and sensationalism to powerful effect, but they do so in different ways. *Dracula* is the more ambiguous text. It is difficult to determine Stoker's position on numerous social, political, moral and religious issues, and the novel's strength and ongoing appeal lie partly in this ambiguity. This is reflected in its form, which presents numerous written and recorded accounts from disparate sources, ranging from diaries, letters and journals of the main characters to objective newspaper reports. This ragged compendium of writing lacks a single moral centre, unlike Shelley's narrative. *Frankenstein* is structured as a symmetrical set of narratives that begin and end with Walton's accounts, which in turn frame Victor's story and enclose the Creature's narrative. The Creature's viewpoint lies at the heart of the novel, and his story is central to its moral argument. Unlike Stoker's novel, which expresses both fears of moral disruption and a desire for such disruption without offering a moral resolution, Shelley's moral position is clear. It was articulated in an early review by her husband Percy Shelley: 'Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked ... divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations — malevolence and selfishness.'

Commentary

This is an assured and conceptually sophisticated ending to an essay, which draws together its argument with clarity and authority. It engages directly with the wording of the question by returning to the idea of fear of moral values and norms being disrupted, while also refining that claim. Rather than merely reaffirming the proposition, the student shows evaluative control by arguing that *Dracula* simultaneously expresses fear of moral disruption and a desire for transgression, whereas *Frankenstein* presents a more focused and morally coherent critique. This nuanced reappraisal demonstrates secure understanding of the task's command phrase 'consider how far you agree' and avoids simplistic agreement or rejection.

Context (AO3) is used particularly well and is the dominant strength of the response. The discussion of late-Victorian sexual repression, double standards, and the tension between outward respectability and private behaviour is convincingly embedded in analysis of Lucy and Jonathan, rather than treated as background information. The reference to Freud's theory of repression and the function of jokes is handled judiciously, offering a critical lens through which the text's subtext can be understood, rather than as an anachronistic imposition. In the discussion of *Frankenstein*, contextual understanding is even more developed: the student shows a confident grasp of Shelley's intellectual inheritance from William Godwin and uses *Political Justice* to illuminate the novel's moral core. This allows the student to reconceptualise the Creature as an allegorical figure for the oppressed, shifting the focus from Gothic spectacle to social ethics. Context here actively shapes interpretation, which is characteristic of top-band performance.

Comparison is handled confidently and productively. The student repeatedly links the two texts through shared concerns — fear of moral values and norms being disrupted — before sharpening the comparison by exploring difference in emphasis, scope and method. This is especially effective in the movement from the sexual and moral ambiguity of *Dracula* to the more ethically focused and socially

grounded morality of *Frankenstein*. The comparison is not merely thematic but conceptual: the student shows how both novels respond to moral anxiety while ultimately articulating very different moral positions. In addition, the comparison is extended to authorial methods and form, which strengthens its analytical depth. The contrast between Stoker's fragmented, multi-perspectival structure and Shelley's symmetrical, framed narrative is used to explain differences in moral clarity and ambiguity, rather than being treated as an isolated formal observation. This ensures that comparison remains integral to the argument rather than decorative.

There is also strong engagement with authorial methods and form, especially in the final paragraph. The contrast between Stoker's fragmented, multi-voiced epistolary structure and Shelley's symmetrical, nested narratives is perceptive and well expressed. The student clearly understands how narrative form contributes to moral meaning: *Dracula*'s lack of a single centre mirrors its moral ambiguity, while *Frankenstein*'s carefully framed structure places the Creature's voice at the heart of its ethical argument.

The writing is fluent, controlled and assured. Critical terminology is used accurately and purposefully, and quotations are well integrated and clearly linked to the student's argument. The conclusion does not merely summarise but synthesises, drawing together themes of sexuality, morality, narrative structure and historical context into a coherent final judgement. Overall, this is a sophisticated ending that demonstrates a secure grasp of Gothic conventions, contextual frameworks and comparative method.

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