# Frame Narratives and the Gothic Subject.

> The repeated appearance of this trope is merely a matter of pastiche, a knowing nod to literary tradition that is in itself unilluminating. […] [T]he found manuscript has in many cases become such a commonplace, even a cliché, that it often expresses nothing more than a desire to mimic earlier texts[1]

## I-      Keeper of the Frame

So endemic to the early Gothic, yet so often critically neglected, the trope of the found manuscript, and by extension the frame narrative, is nonetheless revealing of a particular anxiety within the genre as a whole, and one which contemporary Gothic texts increasingly problematize as a force of narrative antagonism. One only has to think, for example, of Patrick McGrath's Spider (1990) and the eponymous protagonist who frames his own tale to establish it as a counterfactual truth; or Clive Barker's Mister B. Gone (2007), where Jakabok Botch frames his tale, altering the representation of himself to repulse, allure or coerce the reader dependent on his needs; or even Mark Z. Danielewski's House of Leaves (2000), where each framer seeks to control the narratives they find, as Zampanò frames the Navidson Record to exert critical mastery over it and is in turn framed by Truant. Whether found in the library of an ancient catholic family, as a book gifted by an Italian, or the retold tale of a stranger found floating on sheets of ice, the trope of the found manuscript 'has been aligned with Gothic since its beginnings'.[2] Clearly, though, the humble convention has fallen into disrepute, as the epigraph by Baker demonstrates, though he goes on to acknowledge that the 'continued popularity' of this device 'still merits attention'.[3] Rather than merely an empty trope that should only be examined in light of its continued survival, the frame narratives and found manuscripts of the Gothic are still as important to the Gothic of today as the early Gothic texts. It is by first examining an example of the found manuscript in the early Gothic, before investigating a more contemporary Gothic novel, that a significant set of anxieties for the Gothic subject as storyteller will be brought to the fore. Far from a simple nod to the conventions of the genre, there is a continuing thematic anxiety over representation and containment that pervades Gothic manuscripts, seen not only in the apparently sycophantic Robert Walton's mise en abyme in Frankenstein (1818), but continuing through to contemporary Gothic novels, and in particular Sid Hammet's obsessive desire for significance in *Gould's Book of Fish* (2002) both of which will serve as the focus of this analysis.

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[1] Timothy C. Baker, Contemporary Scottish Gothic: Mourning, Authenticity, and Tradition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) p. 56
[2] Baker, p. 55.
[3] Baker, p. 56.

**II-      Captain Walton's Shade**

It can be easy to overlook Captain Robert Walton's frame narrative within Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and, indeed, critical opinion generally tends towards condemning Walton as merely 'Victor's shadow self'[4] or omitting his presence altogether. Yet, via the finding and framing of this story, Walton asserts far more of himself upon the narrative than just serving as a sailor in search of homosocial companionship. One modern reviewer describes the text as 'a seeming story of possibility and empowerment, which as at its heart something more archaic and brutal – a cautionary tale of the revenge of nature and order upon those who dare to oppose them',[5] a sentiment reflected in the tagline to the 1994 Kenneth Branagh adaptation *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*: 'Be Warned'.[6] Walton's tale, however, may be less a 'cautionary tale' than an entirely allegorical story intended to justify his own impending actions.

Before the appearance of the Victor, Walton's voyage appears to be reaching the first potential impasse, as the ship becomes 'nearly surrounded by ice', 'closed in […] on all sides' and 'compassed round by a very thick fog' in a situation he stoically describes as 'somewhat dangerous'.[7] The situation worsens when, with the clearing of the mist, Walton and the crew are confronted with 'stretched out in every direction, vast and irregular plains of ice, which seemed to have no end'.[8] As the crew groan and Walton expresses anxiety over the sight, we see the first indications of the supernatural with the sighting of the creature- a being 'of gigantic stature' riding a sled across the snow.[9] The ice then breaks and following morning Walton, finds a man, Victor Frankenstein, afloat on the ice. A man who seems not only a 'celestial spirit',[10] but whom Walton will come to reflect in the tale to follow; by 'seeking after adventure and personal glory [Walton] parallels Victor Frankenstein's more intense searchings'.[11] Walton presents to his sister the tale of this apparent shadow self, a man who seems to reflect his own quest for scientific mastery, yet one which ultimately leads to the death of his family, closest friends and wife. What Walton achieves in framing Frankenstein's tale is two-fold; namely, power over the truth and a control over those represented, both with the aim of mitigating his own impending failure in the artic.

As stated, Walton is generally critically accepted as the shadow of Victor, though through his use of framing, Walton can be seen to reverse this. By framing the story as his own, as a living manuscript that he has found, he establishes a hierarchical order with his account and self being delivered first and thus the original of which Victor must therefore be an emulation.  Walton 'carefully absorbs Frankenstein's story – a story that will help

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[4] Laura P. Claridge, 'Parent-Child Tensions in Frankenstein: The Search for Communion', Studies in the Novel, 17 (1985), 15–24 (p. 15).
[5] Stephanie Allen, 'Mary Shelley's Frankenstein Is a Cautionary Tale on the Monstrosity of Which Humans Are Capable', Oxford Royal Academy, 2014 <https://www.oxford-royale.co.uk/articles/shelley-frankenstein.html> [accessed 17 September 2015].
[6] Kenneth Branagh, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (United States: Columbia Tristar Pictures, 1994).
[7] Mary Shelley, Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus, 1818 Text, ed. by Marilyn Butler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 12.
[8] Shelley, p. 12.
[9] Shelley, p. 12.
[10] Shelley, p. 16.
[11] Richard J. Dunn, 'Narrative Distance in Frankenstein', Studies in the Novel, 6 (1974), 408–17 (p. 409).

vicariously to redeem the captains solipsistic quest'.[12] In doing so, he establishes the primacy of his account via containment of the other's narrative and forces Victor into the role of the shadow, or rather a superior shade of himself. Instead of an imitation, Victor is an idealised self: to Walton, he 'seems not only a complete but a superior man'[13]. Victor is described as a 'noble creature', 'gentle', 'wise' with a cultivated mind, and even in his initial wretched state 'attractive and amiable'.[14] Walton presents Victor as this idealised self, as an educated man whose pursuits of science have led to his own ruin, in order to force the suggestion that Walton himself, being the lesser, could not hope to succeed in his own endeavour and is therefore wholly justified in attempting to avoid his superior shadow's fate. In one telling section, Victor makes clear this warning, stating:

> Listen patiently until the end of my story, and you will easily perceive why I am reserved upon that subject [of the secret]. I will not lead you on, unguarded and ardent as I then was, to your destruction and infallible misery. Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow.[15]

Walton is that man who 'aspires to become greater than his nature', whose voyage, he states, will confer 'inestimable benefit […] on all mankind to the last generation', and by his framing of the tale, he stresses that he is well justified, should he fail, in turning back to shore.[16] Walton appropriates, or possibly even creates, Victor's tale as an extended mise en abyme. He establishes his power over the narrative to establish Victor as an aggrandised shade of himself, which then allows his control over the representation of Victor; an idealised shadow self, an allegorical man, far superior, who has failed in his scientific explorations to the extent of his own destruction. When Walton turns back to Archangel, and the safety of home, it is only natural that Victor should then die, as a final statement about the folly of reaching too far. The lesson to Margaret, surely, is that Walton is right in turning back, lest he suffer the same fate as this man who was so similar, yet so much more. In his desperation not to appear a failure, something he 'cannot bear' to contemplate, he appropriates the tale, framing it in order to allay his own anxieties of seeming failure.[17]

Walton is thus emblematic of an anxiety that presses the Gothic subject; an anxiety with representation, whether of the self or other- an anxiety that Frankenstein too shares, as evidenced by his corrections and augmentations of the notes.[18] Far from the sycophant that Robert Walton may initially seem, his representations of Victor serve to emphasis the glory of the man, true, though only in order to make his fall all the greater, and Walton's own all the more understandable.

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[12] Claridge, p. 24.
[13] Dunn, p. 411.
[14] Shelley, p. 15.
[15] Shelley, p. 35.
[16] Shelley, p. 6.
[17] Shelley, p. 10.
[18] Shelley, p. 179.

### III-    Sid Hammet's Significance

Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* also problematizes the act of storytelling, though not just with the aim of power over narrative truth, but rather to control the representation of those contained within the narrative. *Gould's Book of Fish* is framed by the story of Sid Hammet, a down on his luck counterfeiter who finds a copy of William Beulow Gould's Book of fish, a document that Hammet describes as 'a dreadful hodgepodge, with some stories in ink layered higgledy-piggledy over others in pencil, and sometimes vice versa'.[19] The text appears to Hammet with 'numerous addenda and annotations crammed into the margins' written on loose leaves of paper and 'what looked like dried fish skin'[20] interspersed with watercolour paintings of fish.[21] The story contained within this artefact is that of Billy Gould himself, a counterfeiter and occasional painter who is convicted of theft, insubordination and mockery of the crown[22] and details his time served at the Sarah Island penal colony, Tasmania. Here, Gould tells his potentially mad and often grotesque story, detailing his employment painting fish for the island surgeon, Lempriere, and the various island upheavals and schemes that he was privy to until his death by hanging.

Hammet's actions in this initial frame of the novel may at first seem as sycophantic as Walton's excessive adoration of Frankenstein. His first reaction to with text, and also the reader's first contact with it, comes in the form of a pseudo-sublime reaction:

> Luminous as the phosphorescent marbling that seized my eyes that strange morning glittering as those eerie swirls that coloured my mind and enchanted my soul- which there and then began the process of unravelling my heart and, worse still, my life.[23]

In reaction to the book, Hammet is overwhelmed by phosphorescent marbling, eerie swirls and a sense that he is becoming unravelled. In line with a Kantian reaction, his sense of self is unable to comprehend the text, and so breaks down, yet he still receives a Burkean sense of exultation as the 'gentle radiance' makes him question whether he has 'lived the same life over and over, like some Hindu mystic forever trapped on the Great Wheel'.[24][25] Hammet becomes obsessed with the book, 'carrying it everywhere, as if it were some powerful talisman, as if it contained some magic that might somehow convey or explain something

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[19] Richard Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish* (London: Atlantic Books, 2014), p. 17.

[20] Flanagan, p. 17.

[21] Flanagan, p. 16.

[22] Flanagan, p. 48.

[23] Flanagan, p. 3.

[24] Flanagan, p. 3.

[25] Helen Dennis describes the difference between Burkean Sublime and Kantian as follows: 'In Edmund Burke's account of the sublime the subject encounters the external cause of terror, the subjects' imagination "swells" and rises to meet it and feels a triumphant pleasure at having expanded the human facilities to join with it. In Kant, the sublime permits the imagination a merely futile attempt at this union before collapsing, and this failure produces not exaltation in the subject but obedient "Respect" '. Though Hammet's self seems to both collapse and also receive the triumphant pleasure of expansion. ( Helen M Dennis, '"Questions of Travel"; Elizabeth Bishop and The Negative Sublime', in Poetry and the Sense of Panic. Critical Essays on Elizabeth Bishop and John Ashbery, ed. by Lionel Kelly (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 53–63 (p. 55). )

fundamental to me'.[26] He is desperate to validate the book, taking it to historians, bibliophiles and publishers 'for their opinion of its worth'[27] the result of which being that 'the bellicose book' is described as 'the insignificant somewhat curious product of a particularly demented mind',[28] a quality forgery, and a 'sad pastiche'.[29] In the wake of the book dissolving into a brackish puddle of water, he eventually takes up the task of re-writing the text from memory, creating the version that we are treated to in text. This frame describes Hammet's finding and subsequent recreation of the text, but this framing has a far more significant agenda than the mere expression of mania. Rather, the justification for Hammet's seemingly sycophantic obsession with the text lies in the main narrative theme of the narrative which he frames – that search for 'something significant', namely, significance itself.

Gould's narrative, after all, is one of enlightenment and transcendence. It is the story of a forger forced to produce something original, the book of fish, and how this ultimately leads him to become something grander than he could have otherwise achieved – in this instance represented by his ultimate metamorphosis into a leafy sea-dragon. In repeating the refrain 'my name is a song which will be sung' throughout the novel,[30] Gould makes clear his desire for permanence, or rather, a legacy that achieves redemption, or freedom and one gained via the fish he paints. 'The criticasters', Gould writes, 'will say I am this small thing & my pictures that irrelevant thing […] but I am William Buelow Gould, party of one, undefinable, & my fish will free me & I shall flee with them'.[31] He ardently believes that, via the painting of the fish pictures for Lempriere, he will achieve some form of freedom and a lasting legacy, that his name will be sung; Gould wishes to gain redemption via enlightenment, by finding and presenting some hidden meaning to the world for, as he writes, 'my real crime was seeing the world for what it is & painting it as fish'.[32] The fish come to represent not just portraits of people, but instead genuine ontological insights, a thing of worth that he is able to pass on and, in doing so, gain transcendence. 'Perhaps', as Robert Hood writes, 'it is best, then, to transform oneself, casting off the oppressive human form to live as a fish, free to swim the depths and watch the endless procession of human history.[33] Gould casts off his human form as he transcends the 'cruel and controlling ways of human history', knowledge he has gained via his artistic creations.[34] Hammet correctly surmises this goal when first describing the book:

> The author wrote in colours; more precisely, I suspect, he felt in colours. […] his
> world took on hues that overwhelmed him, as if the universe was a consequence

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[26] Flanagan, p. 19.
[27] Flanagan, p. 19.
[28] Flanagan, p. 20.
[29] Flanagan, p. 24.
[30] Flanagan, pp. 88, 130, 445–6.
[31] Flanagan, p. 104.
[32] Flanagan, p. 286.
[33] Robert Hood, 'Making Fish Out of Men: Gothic Uncertainty in Gould's Book of Fish by Richard Flanagan', in 21st-century Gothic: Great Gothic Novels since 2000, ed. by Daniel Olson (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2011), pp. 258–269 (p. 267).
[34] Hood, p. 267.

of colour, rather than the inverse. Did the wonder of colour, I pondered, redeem
the horror of his world? [35]

Hammet frames the text in order to appropriate this message of redemption and to
control the representation of Gould within it to just that aim; much as Walton turns
Frankenstein into a grander shade of himself, so too does Hammet turn Gould into a shade of
himself, albeit a darker one living in a far more Gothic world. However, not content to simply
leave the glory of this transcendence to a purely mise en abyme event, Hammet places
himself as a haunting presence within Gould's tale via a distinct blurring of the narrative
boundaries. One way in which Hammet achieves this is through the mirroring of chapter
presentation in order to present his frame as part of Gould's text. Each chapter of *Gould's*
Book of Fish is framed by a replica of the original fish paintings by the real William Beulow
Gould, on whose life the text is roughly based, followed by a brief epigraph of the chapter
events.[36] This applies to both the first chapter, Hammet's frame, as well as each subsequent
chapter, Gould's narrative sections. The join of the frame and main narrative too blurs the
line between the two sections as the text states that 'the first 46 pages of Gould's notebook
are missing; his journal begins on page 47', page numbers which directly correspond to the
pages of the text already expended by Hammet's frame and also the corresponding page on
which the Gould narrative begins.[37] In this, Hammet suggests that his frame is the missing 46
pages, or that his frame at least completes Gould's journal and that the two are a whole.[38]
Gould and Hammet also both express a concern over re-incarnation of a question of a double
identity. Hammet foregrounds this issue in the aforementioned 'Great Wheel' analogy, while
Gould, in a moment of seeming existential crisis, describes a terror that overtakes him with
the suggestion that he 'may actually be someone else':[39]

> Everything around me was beginning to whirl, that all my life was only a dream
> dreamt by another, that everything around me was only a simulacrum of a world,
> & I was crying, lost, I really was somewhere else, somebody else, seeing all
> this.[40]

The blurring between the two continues as the similarities between the men continue to
develop: Each is in possession of a book of fish, before this is either lost or dissolved, and
begins to recreate a second edition from memory; each man turns into a weedy sea-dragon at
the end of their respective stories; each is a counterfeiter and a forger, convicted of their
crime; and each falls in love with a woman in whose contact their identity becomes fluid (The
Conga for Hammet and Twopenny Sal for Gould).

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[35] Flanagan, p. 18.
[36] This being the original intention of the book as seen in the 1st edition, 2002, and subsequent hardback edition
published the same year, though the 2014 re-print curiously decides to remove these replicas.
[37] Flanagan, p. 45.
[38] These page numbers change to reflect the same thematic concern in each edition. See, for example, the 2002
print, which changes the page numbers to 40 and 41, beginning the journal on the latter page number.
[39] Flanagan, p. 125.
[40] Flanagan, pp. 125–6.

Hammet, in framing the text, one could even go so far as to state he has fabricated it entirely, presents Gould as a redeemable man, as a version of himself that has found some life affirming meaning and subsequent transcendence, through artistic creation. In doing so, he cements his own blurring with Gould, attempting a pseudo-vicarious experience where he does not actually live through Gould, but as the man. As Hammet tellingly reveals at the beginning of the text about the tourists: 'They wanted stories, I came to realise, in which they were already imprisoned, not stories in which they appeared along with the storyteller, accomplices in escaping'.[41] The tourists, as ironically hungry for meaning as Hammet himself later becomes, do not wish to travel along with the storyteller, but to be imprisoned within the story itself, an experience that Hammet himself desires; not a vicarious transcendence lived through Gould, but the same experience, the same reactions and knowledge gained by the blurring and becoming of him.

The frame, in this modern Gothic novel then, links back to that of the early Gothic in the expression of a specific anxiety over representation. Walton and Hammet both claim manuscripts, one a man's oral account transcribed and the other a text written by another, but both are taken and formed as allegory.

### IV-    Gothic Storytelling

As a device, the frame narrative reveals much about the Gothic storyteller. By this, I refer to those characters who claim a manuscript, who frame a tale, in order to allay their own anxieties by exerting a power over the truth and a control over those represented within and these Gothic characters are obsessed with containment as a means of establishing their own self-narratives. Walton controls the text that he finds in order to justify his own actions in the failure of his mission, using the example of Frankenstein as a heightened mise en abyme to reflect his own tale, while Hammet grasps at Gould's tale, desperately blurring himself into the narrative and framing it with his own life in order to attain some of the same enlightenment that his darker counterpart finds. The device allows the Gothic subject to claim tales grander or darker than themselves and use them as examples to illuminate their own lives, though seemingly with the aim of allaying their own anxieties over representation in a somewhat ironic fashion; to affect a specific representation of the self, they must control the representation of others. This anxiety over representation litters the contemporary Gothic, where characters claim these tales as part of their own story, framing the narrative to embed it within their own and, in doing so, the Gothic Subject, the framer or finder of their respective tale, presses the tale to serve their own agenda. Anxious of their own representation, the Gothic storyteller is one constantly representing and being represented, telling tales to express their own self-identity and relying on framing the stories of others to present themselves as something more than their own tale could achieve alone. As Hammet ominously states on the process of writing, it serves to remind us 'that we are more than ourselves'.[42]

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[41] Flanagan, p. 10.
[42] Flanagan, p. 33.

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